

Lloyd Pietersen. *Reading the Bible After Christendom*. With foreword by Walter Brueggemann. Herald Press: Waterloo and Harrisonburg, 2012. 259 pp. Reviewed by Robert Martens.

*No one told me I was to contend with consuls and prefects and the most illustrious generals, who hardly knew how to relieve themselves of their abundance of possessions. No one told me I was expected to put the treasuries of the church to the service of gluttony, and the poor-box to the service of luxury. No one told me I must be equipped with superb horses and mounted on an ornamental chariot, and there would be a great hush during my solemn progresses, and everyone must make way for the Patriarch as though he were some kind of wild beast, with the people opening out in great avenues to let me pass, as I came like a banner from afar. If these things offended you, then I say they all belong to the past. Forgive me. (43)*

With these words, Gregory of Nazianzus quit his posting as bishop of Constantinople in 381, not even sixty years after the Council of Nicaea. His disgust with the ostentation and corruption of the official Church of Rome is obvious. In *Reading the Bible After Christendom*, Lloyd Petersen argues that the early church was gradually sucked into the realms of power, and became something else: Christendom, belief and orthodoxy imposed from above, in radical contrast to the teachings of Jesus. Today, Pietersen says, Christendom is dead, and we should count ourselves fortunate. The end of official political religion could mean the return to a theology of the poor and dispossessed, to an authentic Christian life based on Jesus' countercultural message.

In Pietersen's view, the early Church fathers, such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen argued vigorously with each other as they tried to hammer out a foundation for Christianity, sometimes under conditions of persecution. The gospels were multiple; beliefs were not consistent; creeds were written and dismissed and written again. In 325, the Roman emperor Constantine decided that the chaos had to be regulated. He summoned 220 bishops to Nicaea, where they debated, quarrelled, and threatened until the famous Nicene Creed was drafted as a compromise. Christianity, Pietersen writes, became an official bureaucracy. "This is a far cry from the church wrestling with issues by debate and exercising its own discipline in the spirit of Jesus. ... Instead orthodoxy is deeply implicated in the power politics of imperial decree" (49). Constantine ordered his favourite historian to produce a new official canon, a Scripture which would be changeless; eventually, only a professionalized clergy were permitted to interpret it. This moved the Church away "from the Pauline ideal of every member of the congregation having something vital to contribute to the life of the community as a whole" (57). Edicts were proclaimed against heretics; orthodoxy was no longer a way of faith, but an imposed belief system. Christendom finally became all-embracing some 275 years after the Council of Nicaea, when Justinian decreed it illegal *not* to be Christian. "The origins of orthodox, creedal Christianity with its canon of Scripture are thus inextricably bound up with issues of coercion, power politics, and violence" (57).

Christendom began to break down with the Protestant Reformation, and Lloyd Pietersen, who is treasurer for the Anabaptist Network in Britain, argues that Anabaptist theology was one of the strongest voices in the countercultural reinterpretation of Scripture. Anabaptism, he writes, remains vitally important for its rejection of the alliance between church and state; for its interpretation of Scripture by the community; and for its defence of the poor and persecuted. Pietersen finds six main principles in the Anabaptist reinterpretation of Scripture.

1. Christocentrism, following the example of Jesus.
2. A firm commitment to both Word and Spirit.

3. Communal reading and discussion of Scripture.
4. Obedience and ethical living.
5. The clarity of Scripture, which speaks for itself.
6. Devaluation of the Old Testament.

Pietersen accepts the first four principles as essential, though flawed. He does not accept the last two, arguing that Scripture does benefit from historical and critical thinking, and that the Old Testament is an important component of the Scripture's full vision.

Pietersen begins his redefining of Scripture with a new picture of Jesus, interpreted from an Anabaptist point of view. Traditionally, Jesus has been characterized as prophet, priest, and king, thoroughly biblical terms but "too often viewed through the lens of Christendom" (88). Pietersen proposes that Jesus be viewed as a prophet who raises consciousness, energizes the community, and criticizes the existing order; as a pastor who "combines teaching, care, relationship, and protection" (92); and as a poet who speaks in parables. Some of Pietersen's readings are quite controversial. The parable of the mustard seed, he writes, should be interpreted not essentially as the growth of something tiny into something large, but according to the fact that "the mustard plant, although beneficial, quickly gets out of hand and tends to take root where it is not wanted. ... Jesus is much more likely to be emphasizing the problem the kingdom of God poses to the establishment. It tends to flourish precisely where it is not wanted and attracts undesirables (as far as those in control are concerned)" (96).

In the following chapters, Pietersen rather quickly reinterprets the entire Scripture, and finds meaning in every book of the Bible. He writes that the creation story of Genesis, for example, is a direct response to the violent Babylonian creation myth, in which murder and dismemberment play a large role. "In stark contrast, the Genesis creation account poetically portrays the creation of the cosmos by the speech of God and the text subsequently denounces violence in the strongest terms" (111). Pietersen moves on from the sometimes brutal Yahweh of the historical books to the prophets, who proclaim the oneness of Creation. "The Old Testament reveals God as one with a dark side and a violent past, as well as a God of compassion, love, and passionate concern for social justice" (149). Pietersen's analysis of the Gospel and letters in the New Testament sometimes struggles, as he himself admits, with academic language. He ends, however, with the apocalyptic vision of Paul. Revelation, he writes, is an appropriate conclusion to Scripture, but Paul has already proclaimed the same message. In the Roman Empire, where it was decreed that the emperor was God, Paul preached a gospel of a loving community that resisted the powers. "Various powers are named in Paul's letters: law, flesh, sin, world. His whole thought is geared to encouraging believers to embrace their inheritance in Christ and thus no longer live as those enslaved to cosmic powers" (182).

*Reading the Bible After Christendom* concludes with the problems of reading the Bible spiritually and missionally. "Spirituality" is an overused word in today's world, says Pietersen, but rarely includes the Bible. His own Bible study group involves a close reading of the text, and asking how that text speaks to our relationship with the world. As an example of how to read Scripture spiritually, Pietersen comments on four biblical encounters with God, moving from Moses' vision of Yahweh's back "as the awesome Other"; to Elijah's meeting with God "in profound stillness"; to the transfigured Jesus seen by the disciples as "God with us"; and ending with Paul's idea that Moses' unique vision is now open to all: "believers' transformation into the image of God" (212).

Missionally, writes Pietersen, the contemporary church finds itself marginalized in ways similar to the early church. And, like the early church, we find ourselves battling the ancient

gods of power. Mission is justice, non-consumerism, a fight against the god of money, Mammon. Mission is peace, a struggle with Mars, god of war. And mission is community, reflection, and prayer, as opposed to the god of self-indulgence, Dionysus. The Bible, read "from the margins", Pietersen suggests, is an apocalyptic theology beginning with disunion and ending in the victory of the divine cosmos over the hostile Powers. And the Bible, read "in community", prophecies the healing of the cosmos, subverts the domination system of the Powers, and sustains with nourishment for the journey.