

Book Review: *Who We Were Meant to Be: Rediscovering Our Identity as God's Royal Priesthood*

Burden, Matthew. 2022. *Who We Were Meant to Be: Rediscovering Our Identity as God's Royal Priesthood*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock. x, 334 pp. ISBN: 978-1-6667-0874-5. Approx. 490 ZAR (26.55 USD). Paperback.

Matthew Burden is a son of missionaries. He has a service background in South America, along with personal ministry experience in Africa. He is currently serving as a pastor at a Historic Baptist Church affiliated with the American Baptists. He has authored this significant contribution on the rediscovery of our identity as God's royal priests. Matthew holds a Ph.D. from the South African Theological Seminary (SATS), with a specialization in missiological themes in early English hymnody. His writing outputs span both creative and theological genres.

1. Introduction

This book seeks to illuminate the original intent behind God's creation before humanity's fall and it also highlights the redemptive narrative culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is divided into two distinct sections: section one (chapters 2–7) details the biblical and theological basis for seven core points of his corpus, while section two (chapters 8–16) discusses their practical implications within

the context of the church and in the lives of Christians. The narrative starts with Genesis, highlighting humanity's ordained role as creation's royal priests which is disrupted by sin. It showcases Jesus in the Gospels as initiating the new creation, fulfilling the original priestly role, and proclaiming the kingdom of God—tied to the restoration of God's reign. Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation affirm this new creation, restoring our original priesthood and anticipating the final unification of heaven and earth, where God will dwell with his people, and reign forever. This underscores our active participation in God's redemptive plan, inviting us into the ongoing divine symphony, to use the author's musical analogy found throughout the book. This critical review will assess Burden's arguments, examining his use of scriptural and patristic sources, the coherence of his theological framework, and the implications of his thesis for contemporary Christian ecclesiology and practice. Through this examination, the review will aim to discern the contribution of *Who We Were Meant to Be* to ongoing theological discourse and its relevance to the challenges facing modern Christianity.

2. Reductionistic Soteriology and the Symphony of God's Kingdom

When it comes to soteriology, some tend toward relativism, others toward reductionism. The pervasiveness of minimalistic (or reductionistic) soteriology within Evangelicalism is a common theme globally. While we must embrace the simple message of the gospel and the clear, beautiful melody of the plan of salvation, we must be guarded against reducing the Christian message to a formula without greater appreciation for its grand nuances. Burden embarks on a patristic and theological journey, inviting readers into the rich tapestry of Christian identity through the lens of Scripture and early church teachings. This is a detailed and fascinating

piece that is written for those who have a desire to improve current church praxis by inspecting early church traditions that may challenge it. A central feature of his writing is that all of creation was designed to be a divine temple, with humanity positioned as its royal priests and ambassadors. Yet, through sin, this intended unity was fractured, necessitating a savior to restore the brokenness. By exploring the biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelation, Burden reconstructs a vision of the world as God's temple, humanity's role within it, and the cosmic scope of Jesus's redemptive work. This vision not only includes the salvation of individuals but extends to the communal and cosmic, heralding a new creation where heaven and earth are reunited.

Burden showcases that the plan of salvation—central to our faith—at times detracts from the bigger picture of the *missio Dei*. Although Burden does not couch the *missio Dei* in missiological terms, the final chapter is clear that mission is central to the purpose of God and His creation. He argues that his approach does not detract from the beauty and necessity of the individual salvation story but rather seeks to place it within a grand narrative. In this argument, Burden draws deeply from the wells of patristic theology, arguing that the Early Church Fathers, through their closeness to the apostolic age and cultural milieu of the Bible, provide invaluable insights into understanding these foundational truths. Burden challenges believers to engage with the entirety of God's work, recognizing their role not just as recipients of salvation but as active participants in the reconciliation of all things to God through Christ (2 Cor 5).

3. Temple Theology in Biblical Perspective

Although some features of Burden's approach are unique—like his integration of a temple theology and views on theosis cosmology—

overall this is not a completely new approach as it flows in the vein of authors like C. S. Lewis (2001) and John Stott (2006). Others like Dallas Willard (1998), Jürgen Moltman (1993), Alister McGrath (2011), and N. T. Wright (2018)—to name a few—are key proponents of the overall viewpoint Burden promulgates.¹ It is a pity Burden did not engage on a theological level with these authors as their views and arguments would augment and further shape his viewpoint.

Although Burden notes that the inclusion of the temple theme in the Genesis narrative was imposed on the text by early church traditions and writings (p. 26), he does not provide details of such discourses. This would have enhanced his argument and helped to substantiate its overall inclusion. The articulation of his arguments is always well-informed and helps to clarify the overall point, but they do not aid the veracity of his overall arguments that a temple view should supplant a kingdom/people view which is more commonly held among evangelicals. Although this is not explicitly stated throughout the book, the extrabiblical evidence presented is given substantial weight when Burden forms his arguments—at times even more than the biblical text. An example of such is the inclusion of 1 Enoch (p. 98). To a non-theological reader, it is hard to discern if the tail is wagging the dog, so to speak.

Burden did a tremendous job of engaging in his stated research topic and included excellent patristic sources, well-thought-out stories and illustrations, as well as meaningful pastoral and theological reflections

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, Alister McGrath, N. T. Wright, and Dallas Willard enrich evangelical theology by emphasizing Jesus's cosmic redemption. Their contribution is of great importance to the development of the concept theologically in the present age. Moltmann explores hope, McGrath integrates science and theology, Wright redefines Jesus's mission, and Willard applies gospel teachings to life. Collectively they present salvation as encompassing both individuals and creation.

around the biblical text. It felt, at times, that this research was done in isolation from the modern developments of the concepts he was expounding since these developments were not adequately acknowledged. A broader sweep of the topics covered may have enhanced Burden's argument. The book makes some strong points but lacks some scholarly credibility due to a lack of engagement with such sources (p. 26).²

4. The Metanarrative of God's Kingdom Rule

Using the metaphor of a symphony, Burden creatively brings together the melodies of the salvation of individuals with the harmonies of God's grand narrative for creation, temple, and kingdom, urging us to see our role as royal priests in God's divine and victorious symphony. Through his exploration of Scripture, early church teachings, and historical and extrabiblical reflection, Burden encourages readers to tune their ears to the full score of God's redemptive plan, which is both personal and cosmic in scope. The thread Burden uses to make the point in the concluding chapter has been the focus of many paradigmatic works like that of South African Missiologist, David Bosch. In *Transforming Mission* he (2004, 377–378) states, “The church's missionary involvement suggests more than calling individuals into the church as a waiting room for the hereafter. Those to be evangelized are, with other human beings, subject to social, economic, and political conditions in this world...” Referring to Geffré (1982, 491), Bosch (2004, 388) reminds us that there is a convergence between liberating individuals and peoples in history and the final

² “The argument that follows—for interpreting Genesis 1 as a temple text—is one that has been made by a number of Bible scholars recently.” Burden does not elaborate on the actual scholars in the text or in the form of a footnote. Such examples are commonplace. I have no doubt Burden would be able to detail this; therefore his failure to do so is problematic.

culminating of God's reign. In a real sense, the church is “the people of God in world-occurrence” (see also Barth 1962, 681–762).

The scope of the book deals with niche areas of church history and biblical theology that are underscored by several recent missional works that deal with the personal and cosmic nature of the Christian faith. However, the conclusion of Burden's work is perhaps where the book could have started. We are not mere spectators in this divine drama but are invited to take our place on stage, contributing our unique voices to the grand narrative of redemption and restoration. Missiologically speaking, Christopher J. H. Wright, in his magnum opus, *The Mission of God*, argues that the entirety of the Bible is crafted around and centers upon God's overarching mission. To grasp the depths of the Bible (God and our mission), a missional hermeneutic is essential—an interpretative lens that aligns with this overarching missional narrative permeating the Scriptures. While the personal dimensions of God's grace are central, it is crucial to comprehend the big picture of God's mission so that we may be faithful in our role and posture within this world.

5. Conclusion

Burden's work challenges us to move beyond a simplistic understanding of salvation to embrace the rich, multifaceted vision that Scripture offers—a vision where Christ's followers are empowered as agents of reconciliation, tasked with bringing all creation into alignment with God's reign. This vision, deeply rooted in the wisdom of the early church, calls us to live out our identity as royal priests, actively participating in the reconciliation of heaven and earth. The book concludes with a powerful reminder that the symphony of God's plan is still unfolding. We live in the tension of the *already but not yet*, where the kingdom of God is both present and awaiting its full consummation. As royal priests, we have a

critical role to play in this era of salvation history, embodying the values of the coming age and working towards the realization of God's kingdom on earth.

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