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TENDER MERCIES

Reviewed by James B. Jordan

When this film was released in early summer, it was not given wide distribution. Now, however, it has shown up at videocassette rental stores, and doubtless it will shortly appear on satellite television stations. I should like to call attention to it at this time.

Tender Mercies is about a country singer, Mac Sledge, who has ruined his career and life through drunkenness, but who is restored through the tender mercies of God. Critics have universally acclaimed *Tender Mercies* as one of the best films of 1983 (if not the best), and Robert Duvall's performance as Sledge is magnificent. At the same time, however, Mac Sledge is not the central character in this film; the central character is God, portrayed by the wind (of the Spirit).

This is the only film I have ever seen which is self-consciously Calvinistic in its perspective. The basic theme of the film is the irresistible grace of God. It is God who calls Mac Sledge to Himself through the simple faith of a young widow, Rosa Lee (played by Tess Harper), whom Sledge eventually marries. It is God who cares for Rosa Lee and provides her a new husband in Sledge. It is God who cares for her orphaned son, and provides him a new father in Sledge.

The dramatic action of the film comes in the subtle way in which Sledge is gradually transformed from an embittered blaspheming drunk into a Christian husband and father. When Sledge and his stepson are baptized, the boy asks Sledge if he feels different as a result. Smiling, Sledge replies, "Not yet." Conversion is presented as gradual renewal rather than as immediate transformation.

Tender Mercies does not shrink from the mystery of providence. Sledge's former wife, Dixie, is still a country singer, living the decadent life of the music celebrity. Their daughter, Sue Anne, runs off and gets married, and then is killed in a car accident. In the penultimate scene of the film, Sledge expresses anger and confusion over this. He asks his Christian wife why God would choose to bestow His mercy on him, yet withhold it from his daughter. "I prayed God to tell me why I lived and she died. I didn't get any answer to my prayer. I guess I'll never understand" he says. In fact, we know that Sue Anne had been given opportunities to change her ways, but had not taken them. This, however, is not permitted to soften the reality of Divine election. Rosa Lee is silent in the face of Mac's complaint. After all, what can anyone say in the face of the mystery of predestination (Romans 9:20)? All the same, the film shows us the Christian response, for throughout his complaint, Sledge is busy pulling up the weeds in his garden. If a man will respond to God's tender mercies, and pull up the weeds in his garden, then he will find peace and happiness.

The final scene in the film makes this clear, showing Sledge humming a Gospel song about the Holy Spirit, and happily throwing a football with his stepson. God has made Sledge happy. Sledge says, after the death of his daughter, "I never trusted happiness; I guess I never will." Right; but because Sledge trusts God, he finds happiness as a byproduct, in spite of the sorrows of life. This is set in contrast to the goals of Dixie's life: She has sought happiness in things, and has found only misery.

Like many great films, *Tender Mercies* operates not only on the psychological level, but also on the symbolic one. Rosa Lee, Mac's Christian wife, operates a motel and gas station out in the middle of a desert, and in so far as she represents the Church to Sledge, she does indeed provide him a place of rest and a source of power for living.

The mysterious movement of God in the affairs of men is represented by the wind. Since it was necessary for director Bruce Beresford to use a wind machine to get the effect and sound of wind, we can be sure the use of wind is deliberate. The film is about being "born again," and the filmmakers are obviously aware of John 3:7, 8, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." The singing of birds is also used as a symbol of the Spirit, the 'snow white dove' who came to Jesus at His baptism. The viewer should notice the difference between those outdoor scenes in which the wind or the singing of birds is present, and those scenes wherein these elements are absent.

Gardening is highlighted in the film, signifying the restoration of man to his original God-given task. And another important motif is provided by singing, signifying the way a man expresses his innermost beliefs and feelings. At one point, Sledge tells some young musicians that they should "sing it like you feel it." Immediately the film cuts to a scene in which Dixie is singing at a concert, but the words she sings are purely hypocritical; she sings only for money. The money she makes goes to buy her daughter everything money can buy, but money cannot buy happiness, or salvation, a point Sue Anne's death makes dramatically, for Dixie is shown mourning "as those who have no hope." Rosa Lee is also a singer, but twice it is said that she only sings in church. Despite her poverty, she has true happiness and fulfillment.

From the beginning of the film to the end there is a focus on the meaning of death, the place where man confronts his ultimate judgment. How do we face death? How can we prepare for it? When Sonny asks his mother about his father's death in Viet-Nam, Rosa Lee tells him that she does not know how he died (the mystery of death), but that "he was a good boy, and would have made a fine man." What matters is how we live; the rest is God's business. God had removed Sonny's first "daddy," but in His mercy, as the film repeatedly states, God has brought Sonny a new "step-daddy."

Unlike *Chariots of Fire*, which highlights man's faith, *Tender Mercies* highlights God's providential actings. The new faith of Mac Sledge is revealed only indirectly. We see the gradual transformation of his character. At the same time, we are made aware that God Himself is mysteriously present, guiding Mac's life. Mac is allowed time in the desert with Rosa Lee to get his life back together, and then he is brought into confrontations with the pieces of his former life. He has to reintegrate his life in the world with his new-found faith. In all of this, the Wind of the Spirit is graciously bringing him along, one step at a time.

For me, *Tender Mercies* was a more satisfying film than *Chariots of Fire*. I highly recommend it.

Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, Yale University Press, 1983. Hardcover. 299 pages. \$19.95. Reviewed by Ray R. Sutton.

The First Urban Christians is poorly titled. The subtitle, however, comes closer to telling what the book is all about - *The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. Yet, the subtitle still does not do justice to the contents. The phrase, *social world*, implies a broader scope than one will find in the book. In other respects, the title is too narrow for the subject at hand. Thus, to be precise, Meeks's study provides a sociology of first century Christianity. The social world of Paul appears in the first part of the book, but only as Meeks develops more of a sociology of the church.

Meeks refreshingly breaks from a tradition. Wellhausen's JEPD theory argued that free charismatic spontaneity always precedes formal ritualism. Church historians, like Harnack, followed him in this. This is an evolutionary philosophy of history which assumes that life is connected with chaos. Scripture says that man and the world were created mature. Thus, unbiblical methodology looks for the primitive, presumed to be the pure, unstructured church. Meeks's discussions of ritual in the first century Church (pp. 140ff.) gainsay this presupposition. Nevertheless, in his discussion spontaneity and structure are still too dichotomized for a consistent Van Tillian. But Meeks, at least, moves away from an evolutionary interpretation of church history, whether or not he is self-conscious about this.

Meeks also breaks from a Marxist view of first century Christianity (pp.3-4). He notes that Marxist works such as Karl Kautsky's *The Foundations of Christianity* and New Testament studies coming out of the University of Chicago since the early part of this century are *reductionistic*. Interpreting first century Christianity in terms of a class struggle, and as Shirley Jackson Case says, "an answer to some demand of the time," neglects the "theological concepts" of the church. The church was not the antithesis. It was the thesis. Even though he recognizes some benefits resulting from a more sophisticated application of the dialectical model, he maintains that the church acted on the basis of doctrine.

On a more positive note, the major theme of the book, as the title implies, concerns how first century Christianity penetrated the major urban centers of the civilized world. Its success lay in the ability to transform the city into what has come to be known as Christian civilization.

Meeks develops this theme from what he perceives to be the Apostle Paul's world view. Paul divided the world into "city, wilderness, and sea" (2 Cor. 11:26). His world does not include the *chora*, the productive countryside; outside the city there is nothing — *eremia*. The author of Acts hardly errs when he has Paul boast to the tribune, astonished that Paul knows Greek, that he is 'a citizen of no mean city' (Acts 21:39, RSV)."

In a day when Christians wonder whether they should have anything to do with the city, Meeks reminds the church that the city originally belonged to God. Thus, it must be retaken as His possession. Although Meeks does not believe in Biblical inerrancy, and his book contains some

theological and presuppositional errors, his research will prove to be valuable to any serious Christian thinker.

Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Diet/onury of Biblical Theology, New Revised Edition*, Seabury Press, 1973. Hardcover. 712 pages. \$27.50. Reviewed by Ray R. Sutton.

James Barr in the introduction to his monumental work, *Biblical Words for Time*, refers to a revived interest in Biblical theology. A revival which is bringing out the "coherence or unity of Biblical material." Although this "revival" comes mainly from liberal schools in America and on the continent, orthodox students can benefit. Too many, however, do not know what is happening in this field of Biblical scholarship. Fundamentalist scholars are largely blinded by their own Dispensational hermeneutic which atomizes the text, bifurcates the testaments, and fails to see continuity therein. A few are exceptions because they are interested in typology. This forces them to look at ideas in both testaments. Reformed scholars have also often neglected the resurgence of interest in Biblical theology. Although their theology leads to a more organic approach to hermeneutics, little has been done (in print) to advance the area since Vos's classic, *Biblical Theology*. This is the reason for reviewing a book that is ten years old. In one volume, the student can familiarize himself with many new writers in the field of Biblical theology. More importantly, the student will see that one can use an organic approach to the Bible, while avoiding the abuses of the ancient Alexandria school of hermeneutics.

Dufour's brand of Biblical theology is richer than George E. Ladd's, *Theology of the New Testament*, in that the latter basically pours the Biblical writers through a systematic structure. Dufour is concerned to see the relationship of the theologies in Scripture. On the other hand, Dufour is a happy complement to Vos. Vos concentrated on the progressive unfolding of the history of revelation, and this is important to sound Biblical theology. Dufour looks for thematic or organic connections, and fills out the *content* of revelation.

This richness grows out of a concern for the imagery of Scripture. When the Bible consistently refers to the "desert," for example, we ought to look for a theological motif which develops out of this image. In fact, one of the best studies in this volume is on the "desert."

Even when an article refers to a traditional systematic category like justification, it does so in terms of the Biblical theological dimension. The orthodox student will not agree with all the conclusions drawn, but he will come away with a greater awareness of the word-fields and word-concepts related to the subject of his concern.

Dufour is a French, Roman Catholic scholar. He edits this large volume, so it is subject to the weaknesses of most encyclopedic works: Some of the articles are better than others. Most, however, will give the theological student, or pastor, something helpful to work with, as well as introducing him to a whole new field of scholars on the continent.

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