

Embraced in Love

Eric D. Huntsman. *Becoming the Beloved Disciple: Coming unto Christ through the Gospel of John*. Springville, Utah: CFI, 2018. 158 pp. + xviii. Appendix A (The *Logos* Hymn), appendix B (Outline of the Gospel of John), bibliography, index. Hardcover: \$19.99. ISBN: 9781-462136100.

Reviewed by Jenny Webb

In *Becoming the Beloved Disciple*, Eric Huntsman successfully navigates a complex text, bringing clarity, insight, and charity to the Gospel of John in a way that will appeal both to those already well versed in the various textual and historical issues surrounding the Fourth Gospel as well as those who are less familiar with its contents. Huntsman begins with an introduction to the Gospel of John itself, noting the text's additional material (absent from the synoptic gospels), its use of symbolism, and its high Christology before zeroing in on the theme that will sustain the majority of his focus: discipleship.

Huntsman sees discipleship in John as a highly developed and broadly inclusive concept. In Huntsman's reading, John

illustrates the principles of discipleship through sharply drawn characters who all experience the journey of belief, action, and becoming differently. These include not only individual members of the Twelve . . . but also an assortment of other well-described, non-apostolic characters—including Nathanael, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, Mary of Bethany, her sister Martha, and their brother Lazarus. By not focusing only on the special witness of Jesus, John succeeds in providing us with a variety of accessible models for discipleship. (8)

The various characters in John thus represent humanity as a site of rich variety, differing experiences, and thus multiple modes of faith, testimony, and discipleship. In a day and age in which so many conversations revolve around difference as grounds for exclusion, Huntsman's project here to

articulate the space of discipleship in terms of positive difference is both encouraging and necessary, and ultimately makes this book required reading for anyone seriously committed to the idea of global sisterhood/brotherhood in a world-wide church.

The bulk of the book is made up of seven chapters, each of which concentrates on a connected series of events and people in order to explore how they present and develop discipleship in their own way. Chapter 1, “The First Disciples: Come and See” addresses the way some of the first disciples (among them, Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael) came to accept Jesus “simply by their accepting in faith what they heard” from others sharing their own witness and invitation. Huntsman reads John as emphasizing these particular examples in order to “provide us a mirror in which we can view our own walk with the Lord, seeing how the seeds of our testimony were planted and how we can share that witness with others” (17). Chapter 2, “The Mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene: Women as Witnesses” focuses on the importance of women’s witnessing in order to “show us the importance of every person’s discipleship—regardless of sex, ethnicity, economic status, or other background” (29). The readings here are nuanced; Huntsman consistently reads traditionally sticky or problematic points (such as Christ calling Mary “woman”) in ways that favor opening the text to the widest possible audience, or to the reading that witnesses Christ’s divinity. The devotional tone is clearly established from the onset of the book, but it is clear by this point in the text that for Huntsman, devotional does not mean skimming over difficult questions or ignoring current scholarship. Rather, each of the chapters develop their themes carefully through reading the text, asking questions, and then seeking for ways to understand the passages in terms of developing faith and sharing one’s individual witness (i.e., the journey of discipleship).

Thus, in chapter 3 (“Nicodemus: How Can These Things Be?”), the uneven trajectory of Nicodemus’s journey is cast in a positive light as providing an example of discipleship where “we have a desire to believe, but our questions take us along a different path. . . . Still, though our path may

be different than the paths others follow, when we come to know Jesus for ourselves, our discipleship can be no less genuine—and in the end, no less saving as long as we still come to Christ” (41). Likewise, in chapter 4, which takes up the Woman of Samaria at the well, Huntsman emphasizes the way the narrative promotes “Embracing Those Who are Different” (65; the title of the final section in the chapter) by framing the Samaritan woman as “the first truly successful missionary in John” even though she was not “someone that people in that time and culture would have either expected or respected. Likewise, today we must often set aside our expectations and our own biases to let Jesus be the Savior for *all* the world” (65).

The final three chapters continue to develop the theme of positive difference within discipleship as they focus on the crowds to whom Jesus preached as a type of character who respond differently to the hard sayings of Jesus (chapter 5); Mary, Martha, and Lazarus as the friends of Jesus who still each have distinct, individual responses and witnesses (chapter 6); and Peter and Thomas as disciples who come into focus in the latter half of the gospel in order to show “the contrast between their early failings and later, complete restorations” in order to provide “a powerful example of Christ’s grace that can give us hope and encouragement” (108). Huntsman continually emphasizes the way the variety of characters he discusses “can reflect the variety of ways people respond to the saving message of God’s Son in our age. . . . Seeing this vast array of believers and their varied responses underscores that diversity in the family of Jesus Christ is real—and good” (123–24).

The skillful reading and underlying scholarly preparation in this book are put to good use here by Huntsman—this is a book that can profitably be read by a wide variety of people with differing experiences, preparation, and beliefs. In short, I’m strongly recommending it to any and all who wish to gain a greater appreciation for John, and beyond that, a better understanding of the way the gospel of Jesus Christ preaches both diversity and unity together. My quibbles with the text itself were relatively few: at times points made in earlier sections were repeated without much variance in the wording (e.g., page 127), and the endnotes to each chapter, while helpful,

were problematic in terms of their inconsistencies and unfortunate errors (e.g., “Julie A. Beck” instead of Julie B. Beck on page 39). If this book were being presented in an academic setting, these issues would raise more concern given Huntsman’s credentials and expertise, but as a book designed for a popular audience, their presence simply surprised me. And one would be remiss to allow these minor issues to detract from what Huntsman achieves here: a concise, yet thorough, reading of the Gospel of John that brings to light its powerful witness of Jesus Christ as a figure whose life, ministry, death, and graceful atonement are offered to the diverse identities, backgrounds, and choices made by every member of the human race. It is a particularly beautiful envisioning of both divinity and humanity, and it is not to be missed.