

2025

Review of Clark M. Williamson, *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999)

Michael St. A. Miller

Brite Divinity School, MICHAEL.MILLER@tcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.discipleshistory.org/journalofdiscipliana>



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

St. A. Miller, Michael (2025) "Review of Clark M. Williamson, *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999)," *Journal of Discipliana*: Vol. 78, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.discipleshistory.org/journalofdiscipliana/vol78/iss1/2>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Disciples History. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Discipliana by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Disciples History. For more information, please contact jmcmillan@discipleshistory.org.

Clark M. Williamson. *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999. 346 Pages.

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL ST. A. MILLER¹

It's been all of 26 years since the book *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology* was first published by Chalice Press in 1999, and some might wonder why it is being reviewed at this time. I'm enthusiastically pursuing this task because of the conviction that this work has not received the kind of attention it deserves, especially in the denominational community to which its author Clark Williamson was connected. As such, the *Journal of Disciplina* is the appropriate venue to remind persons within this tradition and beyond that this text contains analyses, formulations, and applications that are most valuable in a period when Christians in the US and elsewhere are being required to make critical decisions regarding the death-dealing ways Williamson identifies on pages 19-22 and 39-43.

I've often thought that, while the subtitle is an obvious recognition of the religious parameters that should guide assessments of the book's character, it also seems to be a not so gentle nudge to those within Williamson's ecclesial stream to take the discipline of theology seriously. This is consistent with his explicit declaration that the endeavor was more for the church than for the academy (2). This disposition signals a robust ambition for the educational function within congregations that will show up in his chapter on church (251-276). If, as seems obvious to me, Williamson is seeking to nurture the capacity of church members in general to become competent theologians, his identification of the role of theology encourages an interesting ecclesial dynamic. Theology, he suggests, "tries to make clear what Christian teachings mean by showing what questions they answer, how they answer these questions, and what practical difference it makes to affirm those teachings... Theology tries to strike up a conversation between Christian scriptures and tradition on the one hand, with the context in which we live, on the other" (2). What made Williamson's approach to this responsibility exceptional in 1999 and continues to be impressive today is the complex

¹Dr. Michael Miller joined Brite Divinity School in 2019 as Executive Vice President and Dean. He also serves as Associate Professor of Theology.

of influences and motivations reflected in the orientation of this single-volume work. It is post-Shoah, neo-process, and post-critical (1).

These factors contribute to an impressive expression of systematic theology, an approach to theologizing that is in disfavor among many in the liberal-progressive wing of American Christianity with which Williamson can safely be associated. The content is certainly not an example of dogmatics, which is typically characterized by the identification of non-negotiable doctrinal positions required by ecclesial authority. It is systematic in the sense that it weaves a network of ideas, concepts, and arguments that satisfy the demands of appropriateness, credibility, coherence, relevance, and moral plausibility (29). These criteria are addressed as Williamson pursues a conversational/correlational approach (2-5) over eleven chapters to engage as close to the full range of Christian doctrines as I've seen in any other single-volume of this type.

While it is not possible in a short review to dive deeply into the details of doctrines explored and the methodological elements employed in their development, the reader might be interested in some important anchoring features. Williamson espouses a dipolar view of revelation, in which both God and humanity are necessary (45-47). As such, revelation and interpretation are inseparable (63). Williamson models an approach to engagement with the Bible that privileges a "scriptural process" with a "norm of appropriateness" over a fixed, backward looking "scripture principle." The details of the "scriptural process" are most critical to the character of the whole text. As such, much is at stake in Williamson's expansion of James Barr's mapping of the relation between revelation and tradition with the result being: "God → people → tradition → scripture → post-scriptural tradition." With the reminder that "people are involved in every stage" and that revelation is "derived from all stages alike (79)," Christians are invited into an interpretational dynamic that anticipates what might be in the future while taking seriously the rich foundation laid by what has been.

Williamson seeks to nurture a disposition that counters Christian anti-Semitism by taking the whole Bible seriously and engaging it with the appreciation that if God is not faithful to God's covenant with Israel there is no good reason to presume that God will be faithful to God's covenant with Christians (55). To draw out the post-scriptural trajectory from originating revelations in both Israel and Jesus the Christ, Williamson engages a range of disciplines and conversation partners to construct his network of theological ideas (5-12).

Williamson promotes a doctrine of God that is influenced by a critical synthesis of a number of factors, of which the following stand out. Hebrew Scriptures offer a picture of the faithful covenant-making One; from Christian history is added the intractable challenges that emerge when the problem of evil is addressed in tandem with embrace of the idea of a perfect, omni-qualified God; then there is Alfred North Whitehead's cosmogony that involves the challenge of the relation between creativity and possibility in light of his ontological principle and the replacement of classical substance

metaphysics with the dynamics of process and relationality. Resulting from this synthesis is the idea of a changeably faithful God that operates creatively, lovingly, and redeemingly in a world brought into existence out of nothing, and in which God affects and is affected by all life that includes partially free and partially self-creating humans (104-111). As a faithful companion, even the co-sufferer who operates providentially, God “saves the world by taking into God’s life all of God’s children,” with “a tender care that nothing be lost” (116, from Whitehead’s *Process and Reality* 346). This God “struggles with and against hostile powers and seeks to breathe new life into the ‘dry bones’ of ‘God’s people’” (128, 138).

It is the human being with whom God is covenanted that Williamson discusses and makes proposals about in chapter six. There he guides us to an understanding of self and other in light of our connection to God, and in view of a call to be a blessing to each other as neighbor and to serve each other’s well-being. Thus, a framework is established for assessing the human situation under a number of categories that addresses the tension between our finite-sinful-frailty and our fundamental nobility as God’s covenant companions. Given the national climate in the period in which I write this review, I call attention to Williamson’s discussions on racism, classism, anti-Judaism, sexism, and heterosexism, and highlight his bold wrestling with favorite proof-texts from the Bible that are directed against gay and lesbian people (172-178). He ends this chapter in a telling way that is worthy of being quoted fully and contemplated slowly:

The closed-off, absolutist, ethnocentric theology of Christendom cannot finally permit others to be in the world. One of the biggest challenges to contemporary Christians is to learn to welcome strangers. Their ways of being human, by sheer contrast with ours, will cause self-doubt and self-questioning. Openness to strangers requires openness to questioning and a willingness to be questioned, because strangers are questions to us and bring their questions with them. Nonetheless, the moral measure of Christian theology will increasingly be taken by its capacity to welcome strangers and to guard their dignity and well-being (184).

Williamson’s neo-process God-talk is presupposed in his discussion on Jesus as the pioneer of the Christian faith. He provides a very helpful overview of the history of Christological reflection. Tellingly, he claims that classical Christology collapsed under its own weight and it was the humanity of Christ that suffered (213). Indeed, “traditional Christology never escaped Docetism (185-213).” Of the weaknesses identified in modern Christologies, the most striking is the distancing of Jesus from his Jewish roots. This compounded the “Adversus Judaeos” tendencies evident in Christianity from the early centuries of its existence (245) and helped to open the way for the rise of Nazism in Germany. It is a liberation Christology that Williamson promotes as most reflective of the life of the one who as “the decisive revelation of the God of Israel ... is a gift to the church from the God of Israel and the Israel of God (59).” He invites the reader to take

seriously the fact that the Jewish man Jesus, for whom God was his life and who became Christ to his followers, lived and acted in context. His ministry, teaching, and acting was in response to questions and issues that emerged among his people under subjection to imperial Rome. They would have heard his words and interpreted his actions as people “in captivity in their own land, in exile at home, under occupation by an emperor who claimed to be god but was not (188).” Along with addressing popular representations of the apparent oppositional relationship Jesus had with Pharisees, Williamson links him to John the Baptist in his commitment to the restoration of Israel under God and torah and in his death by the hands of the Romans. Having provided examples of the liberating import of Jesus’ words and actions, he reminds us that Jesus’ movement “was for the poor, the hungry, and the mourners,” and his approach to them and his calling of disciples were expressions of the radically new kind of community he wished to foster (199). In his discussion of Church in chapter nine this community is characterized as an Egalitarian Community of Blessing and Well-Being (261). It was not surprising, Williamson suggests, that Jesus’ followers began talking of him as Messiah or “anointed one” (199).

The concept of an Egalitarian Community of Blessing and Well-Being is at the heart of Williamson’s ecclesiology. This radical understanding constitutes the substructure of his analysis of the classic marks of the church: “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” (258-263). Adding other features contributed by the Reformation tradition, he points out that these allude to a normative description of the church. In other words, they do not describe actual churches, but represent an attempt to state what God gives and calls church as the people of God to be. Yet, reflecting discussions in the previous chapter on the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ life and the community of faith, he insists that the church is not called to be anything it is not empowered to be (257). Against the background of this challenge, I ask the reader to bear in mind that it is when talking about the poor that Williamson takes up the notion Kingdom of God. He points out that in stark opposition to Rome, the kingdom Jesus announced “was not one of domination, but of service, one of welcome for destitute and marginalized, one that included the poor and homeless. This communitarian, egalitarian movement ... of the nobodies of Galilee acted a new way of being human.” Reinforcing the link between ecclesiology and pneumatology, Williamson points out how the church, which he in one place described as “that community of human beings called into existence by God, through the Holy Spirit,” gradually lost this vision as it became established and increasingly allied to the rich and powerful in the ancient world as also in contemporary America (24, 269).

This link between ecclesiology and pneumatology was also evident when in the discussions of chapter eight where the “Holy Spirit” as “God’s Spirit” was portrayed as that which “brings well-being and blessing ... reconciles the alienated ... gathers the scattered into community ... rescues the fallen ... illuminates the confused” and ... “gives hope to the hopeless (240).” With awareness of this crucial link, I point to another declaration. It is that “The early church brought blessing and well-being to the poor, the

dirty, the smelly, the homeless, those Jesus called ‘the least of these.’” He asks, tellingly: “What would the church today look like were it to follow him?” (272) And later, he encourages mainstream Protestants in America to rediscover “the excitement of being a community on the way, a pilgrim people, ‘whose citizenship is in heaven’ (Phil. 3:20)” (276).

It is with this ecclesial orientation that Williamson addresses mainstream Protestantism about being open without loss of identity (252-253). It is also the background to the pursuit of the ever-deepening comprehension of the significance of preaching, sacraments, and ministry as means of grace and expressions of identity that is explored in chapter ten (278). And as we experience a mix of intimidation because of the enormity of call as followers of Jesus the Christ and the often-frustrated yearning for the fulfillment of our Jesus-inspired hopes and dreams for self, community, and world, the closing chapter on eschatology should loom as enormously important. Indeed, eschatology is presented as significant to the hope harbored by Israel, central to Jesus’ practice as portrayed in the Gospels, and foundational to the early church’s confidence (299-308). Having acknowledged the process by which the church’s eschatological disposition waned, Williamson provides reasons for its continued importance (308-312). He effectively points our attention back to the idea of God as a co-suffering covenant companion whose love was manifested in Jesus, who affects and is affected by everything in the world, and from whom nothing is lost that can be saved. Because of this God’s love and astonishing grace in face of human failure and sin Williamson is able to side with Julian of Norwich’s claim that in the end “all will be well (316).”

At this point some might be incredulous about Williamson’s intention that this work be employed for educational purposes in congregations because of the concepts addressed and language used. If so, this reaction would say as much about the impressive ambition Williamson harbored for American Christians as it does about the failure of congregations and denominations in the educational responsibility he viewed as fundamental to the viability of Christian witness. As he said on this matter:

The churches will not inherit the promise to them of being founts of blessing and well-being, either to themselves or their neighbors, unless serious steps are taken to reverse this situation. Nor will the remedy be a quick fix. Yet we cannot continue to fail to communicate the excitement of Christianity to the next generation (255).

By some contemporary assessments, *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology* is now old. However, it took Williamson many decades of studying, teaching, and application-informed distillation, to develop the mature theological positions explicated in this text. With the hope that I’ve been able to represent the excellence of the outcome, I vigorously encourage increased engagement of its contents in the contexts he intended. I do so with the strong conviction that this text should join the

ranks of other notable theological works with interesting, life-transforming ideas that remain relevant for multiple generations.