

ALLEGRA FRIESEN EPP lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where she attends Home Street Mennonite Church, studies theology at Canadian Mennonite University, and enjoys living on treated and unceded territory.

David W. Congdon, *The God Who Saves*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR, 2016. 340 pp. \$51.75. ISBN: 978-1-6089-9827-2.

The term *good news* as used in the ancient world was simply the news of an event that was assumed to be good in relation to those receiving it—news of a birth, wedding, victory, etcetera. In most Christian theology and church policies today, however, it seems we have traded the event for the message itself. With this shift, the church has historically positioned itself as the one who ultimately controls the script. Progressive, social, and critical theologians—wanting to dislodge the message from the hands of the church—have tended to relativize the role of the church in God’s mission, or render the message of salvation into fully material or social forms. Rather than try to wrest or rewrite the message, David Congdon’s ambitious *The God Who Saves* considers what it means to give primacy to the *event* of salvation, not its message. In charting this theological course, Congdon opens up neglected theological insights with far-reaching implications for the church and mission.

Congdon asserts that theology must be *soteriocentric*—God is known as the God who saves. That is, God is known in and through God’s saving action. Congdon then spends considerable energy describing what Christian theology *is not*; primarily, Christian theology is not metaphysical. Congdon uses the term metaphysics to refer to “any conceptual schema that secures the object of its inquiry . . . apart from and prior to the historical situation” (33). Jettisoned from authority are the eternal “essences” of God revealed in the “timeless” truths articulated theologically through Scripture, logic, or reason. With the theology of Rudolf Bultmann (and those influenced by and in conversation with him) as his guide, Congdon begins to work out a theology of salvation that is decidedly unfamiliar (and perhaps unacceptable) to most theological paradigms.

Salvation, according to Congdon, is neither defined by material expressions such as releasing the captives and feeding the hungry, nor by some notion of assurance of communion with God in heaven after one dies. Instead, “Salvation is an apocalyptic event” (64). What Congdon spends the rest of the book explaining is that the message of the gospel *spiritualized* the notion of salvation within its original Jewish context with Jewish salvation understood primarily in material and political terms. Yet, as mentioned, Congdon is not interested in “spiritual” as related to eternal life in heaven but in how the gospel works on any and every individual regardless of time or place. The gospel is an apocalyptic event, spiritualized and repeated within

each individual, breaking them away from themselves in whatever form and place that might be.

Evoking Pauline language, Congdon asserts that the self is formed by “the spirits of the age”—that is, the world. The gospel event is apocalyptic because it breaks the self from the world, “making us wholly insecure in ourselves but wholly secure in God” (83). Figuring salvation as a spiritualized event (not given to any metaphysical security) reflects Congdon’s existential/dialectical interests, seeing in the gospel something always at work, always unsettling us.

For Congdon, salvation is never stable enough to anticipate fully and thus control or manipulate. Throughout the book, then, are appeals to paradox, mystery, and contradiction (destabilizing events). Such events are necessary because we remain vulnerable to the sway of the world, which tends to sediment expressions of God into idolatry or take possession of the individual as in the “demonic.” Examples of such contradictions or paradoxes include God’s presence being best known in God’s absence (88, 128), or that God is known in our unknowing or unconscious (90–102).

Shedding the stability of metaphysical theology means that anyone who has experienced the event of being thrust out of themselves and into an otherworldly grace has experienced the gospel, however such experience might be articulated. Conscious Christianity, then, is at best a discipline in trying to render itself open again to the apocalyptic message of salvation. “Christians thus gather for the sole purpose of being interrupted and displaced by Christ so that their lives may correspond to his ever anew” (99).

The unfolding of this theology has tremendous implications for the church and for the church’s sense of mission. Perhaps most significantly, Congdon states that the church is *not* the site of salvation. Salvation involves the unconscious dislocation of the self into the being of God. This event repeats, differently, the apocalyptic event of the crucifixion and resurrection. Congdon thus reverses the ancient axiom from *there is no salvation outside the church* to *outside of salvation there is no church*. The church here has no lineage through tradition or orthodoxy but is a collective *becoming conscious* of the apocalyptic event of salvation within particular situations (189). This leads Congdon to a particular take on universal salvation that is neither simply “heaven for all” nor “all religions are equal.” This universalism is the logical conclusion of his theology, because theology cannot be grounded in any authority or community but exists only in the event of the individual rendered from themselves in relation to God. No privilege is offered for access to or distribution of such an event.

Congdon rejects a stable form of salvation, concluding that it is neither the spiritual benefits of an afterlife nor material benefits in this life. He questions the very idea of a personal, conscious afterlife, because the scriptural tradition is so vague and

inconsistent in its understanding. Congdon also rejects a straightforward material understanding of salvation because of his conviction that material goods alone are insufficient for salvation; one must also break with the world. While Congdon focuses on the individual, this does not mean that salvation is private. Rather, the individual is saved from the world to be free in God to participate in and repeat the apocalyptic event of Christ—namely, a revealing and rejecting of the demonic powers of the world that continue to keep people in bondage, with the result that we become open in new ways to love what is around us. The event necessarily has social, political, and material effects.

Congdon's theology will undoubtedly have its critics from progressive theologies for its lack of political agenda, from evangelical theologies for its diminishing of conscious decision (never mind a conscious afterlife), and from mainline theologies for his rejection of the church's tradition and liturgy as offering anything unique to the world or even needed for discipleship. My own criticisms push on how this theology leans toward valorizing the suffering of those who are already rejected (thrust from themselves) by the world (95–96). In addition, the particularity of Christ—his life, death and resurrection—remains a question. Congdon appears unwilling to fully follow through on this theology and name the arbitrary and contingent nature of his own encounter with Christianity and how the particular event of Christ may become completely unnecessary in his theology (or simply one witness of an apocalyptic event).

What then after these criticisms? Congdon's work offers a wager. The wager is that faith indeed is sufficient. The mission for the church remains one of moving out but not because the church *possesses* the truth—the message—of the gospel but because the church as church *cannot* possess the gospel and so each individual must allow themselves to be thrust out from the stabilizing tendency of the church (which has no inheritance to offer), to be ever open to the event of God's salvation whenever, wherever, and however it might happen. This is the Pentecost event. The curse of Babel becomes the blessing of the spirit in which faith has no predetermined cultural form to which one saved must conform to (169–70). The church exists as a confrontation with the world. The mission at its best is to stage the possibility of such confrontation.

Rejecting the metaphysical and re-positioning the material, Congdon has turned to the individual. He has done so without collapsing the gospel into personal individualism. Individualism in our age is more a herd mentality of capitalist culture (markets, brand identity, consumer choice, etc.). Congdon's appeal to the individual as the site of God's saving work offers a critical check and universal opportunity. That is, Congdon has articulated good news that there has been, is, and can be a break with the world from which life may be experienced—a life that is neither controlled nor distributed by any institution, nor limited by any creed or ideology.

There are questions that remain with the message as Congdon articulates it, but it is a message well worth considering.

DAVID DRIEDGER lives in Treaty 1 Territory—the lands of the Anishinaabe, Nehiyawak, Dakota, Nakota, and Red River Métis—and is Associate Minister at First Mennonite Church in Winnipeg.