

A Book Review by Darrell Hartwick

## *On Reading While Black* by Esau McCaulley

**“An exercise in hope” with each chapter more hopeful than the one before**

In Chapter One, which functions as the Introduction, the author states his goal to be a fourth way among these options:

1. African American Progressives
2. White Mainline Protestants
3. White Evangelicals
4. “Black Ecclesial Theology”

I’m convinced he’s succeeded, without damaging the unity of the church or impugning the authority of Scripture. How can a “fourth way” preserve the unity of the church? If his way, and my tradition, are going in the same direction for the same reason, we are united. I think this is the Church Universal: all who truly follow Jesus are united, regardless of a particular ecclesiastical structure that might surround them. Since the first and second ways (above) seem to have a different source of authority, perhaps they are part of a different “Church.” But the author doesn’t speculate on such things, and implicitly includes all four in his definition of the church. Esau McCaulley’s title, and America’s fraught racial climate, shouldn’t distract the reader from the fact that this book is about the **Bible**. While the author speaks regularly of black scriptural interpretation, he never does so in a way that does violence to the truth and authority of Scripture. This is one reason the book gets better with each successive chapter: I can imagine the author listening as God speaks, rather than griping about edits and revisions God ought to have made before publishing His Book. This becomes more and more evident as the chapters move from one difficult topic, to an even *more* difficult topic. What he says about interpretation in Chapter One “The South Got Somethin’ to Say” and the related “Bonus Track” is interesting, if a bit dry. What he says about policing in Chapter 2 ought to be obvious (but, sadly, doesn’t seem to be). But when Chapter 5, concerning the Bible and black identity, queued up, I was all but shouting “Yes! Yes” after each page. This is when he had fully convinced me concerning church unity, without actually using the word. God’s promise to Abraham that he would be “the father of many nations” was “first fulfilled by bringing two African boys [Ephraim and Manasseh] into the people of God” and into the Promised Land. Furthermore, Africans were writing books and MSS for the greatest library of antiquity, at Alexandria, while Northern Europeans were barely surviving successive winters in small villages and vast forests. African Americans do not need to follow white American Evangelicals down a particular path, since Africans were already following Jesus, literally, along the Via Dolorosa. If I may return to the author’s soundtrack analogy, by the time he got to chapters Six and Seven, about black anger, and slavery, he practically had me singing along. OK, actually I was rather fearful, but my hope was rewarded, as I hope you will be, with powerful and concise reflections and conclusions on these heavy topics.

B. B. Warfield's monumental "The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible" contains his allegory of a scientist, far away in a laboratory, vainly describing the physics that might enable one to individually dodge the larger rocks in a landslide. Warfield compares the scientist to the progressives of his day, studiously denying an avalanche of evidence concerning the Bible's truthfulness. In this equally solid book, in a way that's both scholarly and personal, Esau McCauley has convinced me that he and I are travelling along the same path, neither consciously following the other, nor needing to. Guided by Scripture and the Holy Spirit, we can forge a faithful, vibrant, *distinctively Christian* response to the ills of our world. All other ground is sinking sand.

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