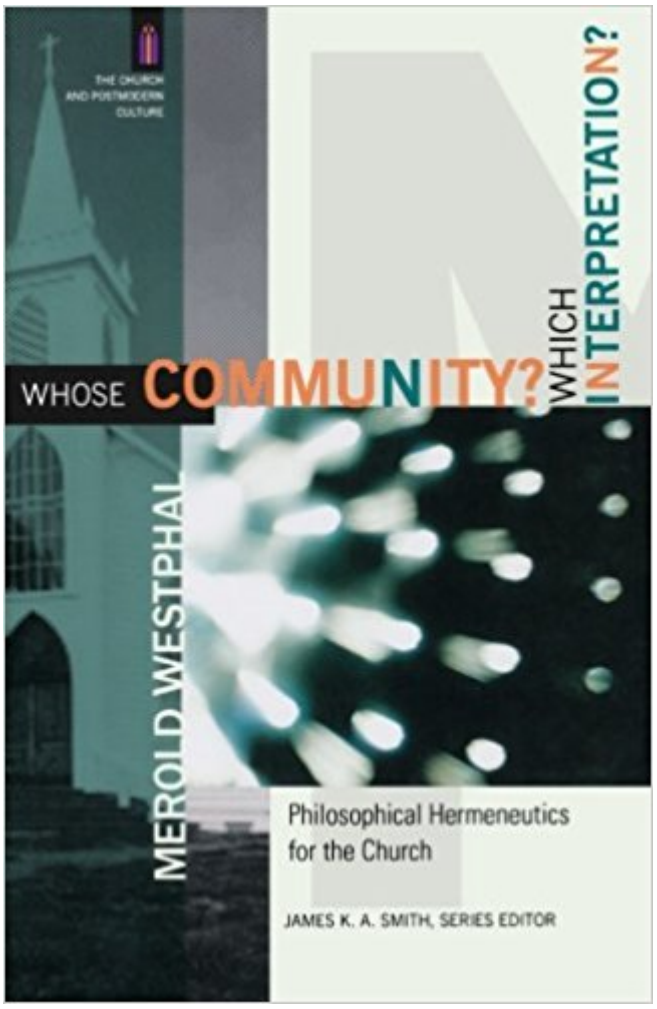
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Whose Community? Which Interpretation?: Philosophical Hermeneutics For The Church (The Church And Postmodern Culture)



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Synopsis

In this volume, renowned philosopher Merold Westphal introduces current philosophical thinking related to interpreting the Bible. Recognizing that no theology is completely free of philosophical "contamination," he engages and mines contemporary hermeneutical theory in service of the church. After providing a historical overview of contemporary theories of interpretation, Westphal addresses postmodern hermeneutical theory, arguing that the relativity embraced there is not the same as the relativism in which "anything goes." Rather, Westphal encourages us to embrace the proliferation of interpretations based on different perspectives as a way to get at the richness of the biblical text.

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Customer Reviews

In this compelling volume, renowned philosopher Merold Westphal introduces current philosophical thinking related to interpreting the Bible. Recognizing that no theology is completely free of philosophical "contamination," Westphal engages and mines contemporary hermeneutical theory in service of the church. He encourages readers to embrace the proliferation of interpretations based on different perspectives as a way to get at the richness of the biblical text."Merold Westphal is a clear, insightful, and astute interpreter of philosophers for Christian understanding and of Christianity for philosophical understanding. A faithful and learned churchman, Westphal here mines his deep philosophical learning but wears it lightly, enabling beginners to access important insights

while inviting others to probe significant issues. This book deserves a wide readership."--L. Gregory Jones, dean of the Divinity School and professor of theology, Duke University"Westphal deftly navigates between hermeneutical despair and hermeneutical arrogance to arrive at a hermeneutic that affirms the vital importance of interpretation and yet insists that Scripture itself truly speaks. The result is not only a judicious and correct theory of interpretation but also a striking demonstration of what such a humble and respectful hermeneutic looks like in practice."--Bruce Ellis Benson, professor and chair of the philosophy department, Wheaton College"In this beautiful little book, Merold Westphal brings to bear on the interpretation of Scripture his life-long interest in hermeneutics. With his customary clarity of analysis and style, the author debunks the common equation of interpretation with relativism, showing theologians, pastors, and laypeople what the church can learn from philosophical hermeneutics about reading and performing God’s word. Besides showing how ’Athens can be helpful to Jerusalem,’ this book provides an excellent introduction to Gadamer’s hermeneutics and to the most-central issues and thinkers surrounding interpretation theory, including the important aspects of community and politics. This book is a gift not only to the church but also to anyone looking for a clear and thoughtful introduction to contemporary interpretation theory."--Jens Zimmermann, professor of English and Canada Research Chair for Interpretation, Religion, and Culture, Trinity Western University

Merold Westphal (Ph.D., Yale University) is distinguished professor of philosophy at Fordham University in Bronx, New York, where he has taught for more than twenty years. His many publications include Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought and Overcoming Onto Theology.

Whose Community? Which Interpretation is an excellent primer in Christian / Biblical hermeneutics. It explores the relationship between author, text, and reader by demonstrating that the text is much more than a mere medium for carrying information from one mind to another. In fact, this cannot be achieved, even by the best writer or the most efficient, observant reader. The text itself, embedded, as are both authors and readers, in a language, am era of time and even a format, communicates something that both restricts and expands the author’s intention.Applying these lessons to the text of scripture, a believer becomes aware that the intent human author of a passage in question, the context of that passage within the Christian canon, the history of refection on that passage by other believers, the fact that believers accept the text as having in some sense Divine authorship, the use of the passage in worship or prayer -- all of these factors are present as the reader, herself

embedded in a specific language, era of time, and religious community opens the book.This is a book that leads to a degree of reasonable humility in conversations about and applications of Holy Scripture.

This is a really fantastic book and an essential introduction to hermeneutics for those who are concerned as much with how we look at things as with what we look at. It is as James KA Smith suggests in the foreword, a "course in a box" -- a wonderful opportunity to learn from a master philosopher and a master communicator.I am aware that some people, especially those who tend to find themselves on the conservative side of the theological fence, may have an allergic reaction to Westphal's suggestion of a relativist hermeneutics, but such a reaction would be out of place. In no way is Westphal suggesting an "anything goes" hermeneutics. In fact, he goes to a lot of trouble to explain that the fears that arise in the face of the 'specter of relativism' are largely unfounded. Do you actually know anyone who honestly believes that 'anything goes'? Let's be pragmatic about it: have you ever met someone who is well-and-truly a relativist? Even the most extreme philosophical anarchist abides by the fact that words mean particular things even if language itself is a little elastic. Even the most abstruse philosophical deconstruction is confined to the human condition. I.e. even the most rabid postmodernist still has to go to the shops to buy bread and milk and even the postmodern surgeon must use a scalpel rather than a penguin.What Westphal does is navigate the territory between hermeneutical arrogance (and thus theological absolutism) and hermeneutical despair (and thus nihilism) and I suspect that those who are prone to either of these approaches will struggle to grasp the balance that Westphal is trying to maintain. But maintaining balance is something that he does very well. In the end what strikes me as being particularly remarkable about this book is the spirit in which it is written. It is assured, but humble. It considers our epistemological/creaturely limitations, but also takes into account our ability for understanding. In the end, by adopting a tertium quid, this book assumes the centrality of faith to philosophical hermeneutics -- something that overly rationalistic or nihilistic approaches to interpretation simply cannot achieve.

Merold Westphal is quickly becoming my favorite Christian thinker and writer. He writes clearly with humor and eloquence, but he shows a humility that I think is rarely seen in academic writing. Even if you disagree with him, you can learn from him.I am not a philosopher (in the academic sense). Rather I am a just a layman who, as described in this book, is primarily in discussion with the Bible and God in private study, though I do enjoy conversations within the communities of local church

and beyond. Until recently, I would say my presuppositions or tradition included treating as normative the "objective" meaning of the Bible from its original human authors; but, as a charismatic, I would also say my traditions include a willingness to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit to find new meaning beyond that tradition. So, I was primed to be receptive to Westphal's message.I say all the above to provide context for my main point: this book is brilliant. It provides a cogent argument that every Christian should be open and willing to listen to others (especially other Christians) without prejudging them. Though we may disagree on many points, we all seek to know and serve the Lord and make Him known to others. Furthermore, we all have different traditions or presuppositions that naturally make up part of who we are, but we are all human with limited wisdom and subject to error. We should be open and willing to examine our traditions and seek out the parts of others' traditions that form the whole of God's truth. This does not mean we must give up our own traditions or reduce God's truth to the things we agree upon. Rather, we agree to disagree on certain points and focus on the essentials, including the primary essential truth of our faith: Everyone needs a Savior from their sins and Jesus is that Savior.If you are open and willing to listen, Westphal is a humble and inspirational teacher. You just might be surprised what you'll learn.

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