

Book Review: Duane Litfin, *Word versus Deed: Resetting the Scales to a Biblical Balance*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012

Reviewed by Benjamin L. Hartley

Five years ago, when Duane Litfin served as President of Wheaton College, he expressed a concern in that institution's *Wheaton* magazine (Fall 2007 issue) that the balance is being lost between "word and deed" in evangelicals' witness. This work is a book-length treatment of that concern. Litfin is, in fact, correct that there is a need for clarity concerning the verbal and nonverbal dimensions of Christian witness. Unfortunately, this book mostly befuddles more than it clarifies. The most significant problems with this book can be placed in three broad categories: historical, terminological, and biblical.

While not intending to provide a thorough historical treatment of this issue, in the early chapters Litfin briefly retells the standard history of American evangelicalism that has its origins in the early 20th century fundamentalist movement and its opposition to liberal Protestantism's embrace of the "social gospel". This is only *part* of the story, however, which leaves out large swaths of Mennonite, Methodist, holiness, and Pentecostal movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For many of these groups the contrast between "Word versus Deed" was never so extreme as it was for those groups that emerged from the fundamentalist movement. Their history is instructive.

A second, more serious, problem in this book is a terminological one. Litfin rightly states the importance of clarity in the words we use to express Christians' need to be faithful in word and deed. Ironically, one of the biggest problems in this book is precisely his poor choice of words. Two examples will suffice to demonstrate this. First, while Litfin entitles his work *Word versus Deed*, these are not in actuality oppositional concepts. Litfin admits that it is important for Christians to be faithful in both word and deed. But by using the term "versus" repeatedly in this book he confuses the issue. His imprecise use of the term "preach" is also distracting. In early chapters he argues against persons who state that one can "preach the Gospel" with deeds. The problem here is with the metaphorical use of the term "preach". Of course one cannot "preach the Gospel" with deeds. The act of preaching on Sunday morning everywhere is a verbal activity. In the second chapter Litfin finally gets more precise and states clearly that "[t]he gospel can only be communicated with words." But then, on at least three occasions, (pages 83, 127, and 148) Litfin states explicitly that the gospel must be "lived"; this would suggest that the gospel involves more than words. These contradictions could have been easily avoided if he had described the more narrowly-defined task of *evangelism* as a verbal component of Christian mission rather than reducing the whole of the Gospel to something that "can only be communicated with words."

Finally, it is in his assessment of Scripture that Litfin perhaps makes his most significant errors. Litfin notes that many Old and New Testament texts about poverty and the poor refer to the poor among the Israelites or Christian community rather than to outsiders beyond these communities. This is true, but Litfin understates the outward direction of God's mission which includes concern for the poor throughout the Bible. For Litfin, this outward focus toward the poor beyond the Israelites appears to be limited to the biblical books of Proverbs and Job (p. 88). The book of Jonah, the second half of Isaiah,

Amos, Hosea, Ruth, and the stories of Melchizedek, Jethro, and Cyrus could all be pointed to as examples of God's mission extending beyond the Israelite community. It is true that many of these stories do not speak directly to the problem of poverty, but I believe Litfin portrays too sharp a line between insiders and outsiders than is warranted in Scripture.

Litfin is imbalanced in other ways as well. For example, he suggests that a theological position which espouses a "preferential option for the poor" is the result of a superficial numerical counting of Bible passages on poverty rather than being a respected part of official Roman Catholic social teaching (not only from "liberation theology movements of the 1960s"). Litfin provides a critique of this teaching in a footnote, but not in a very thorough manner.

In spite of these problems – and perhaps because of them – this book may still be helpful for evangelicals who are searching for a different sort of "balance" between Word and Deed. Litfin rightly asserts that issues of biblical interpretation must be given serious attention. My hope for this book is that other evangelical leaders will use it to identify how and why they differ from Litfin. This reviewer found the book clarifying for that reason. Others may as well.
