McKnight, Scot, and Adrienne Gibson. *Traumatized Church: What Paul's Relationship with the Corinthian Church Teaches Us About Helping Those Who Are Hurting*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2026. 236pp. + 15pp. (front matter) + 11pp. (back matter).

In *Traumatized Church*, NT professor Scot McKnight teams up with licensed professional counselor Adrienne Gibson to address psychological trauma (Gibson) and to examine the apostle Paul's relationship with the church at Corinth through the lens of a trauma-informed reading. The authors subdivide the book into four sections: Trauma Informed, Trauma Sensitive, Trauma Safe, and Trauma Healthy. The first three chapters define trauma—"an event or an experience that overwhelms our capacity to cope" (1)—express its subjectivity or perception-orientation (11), assert that it is embodied physiologically (16), reify its effects (17), expand diverse human conflicts into trauma (20), and express the four responses (fight, flight, freeze, or fawn) to threats (36).

Chapters 4 through 8 encourage the reader to become "trauma sensitive" via active listening to an injured person's story, claims, and explanations. Here the authors acknowledge that many church conflicts stem from a quest for power (50–51), that unjust accusations may exist (51), and that the perpetrator may invert (and subvert) victim-perpetrator roles (52). Chapter 5 articulates key charges that the Corinthian rebels leveled against the apostle Paul. They called him fickle (68), duplicitous (70), inadequate in appearance (71), mediocre (77), incapable as an orator (79), preferential (80), and surpassed by others (82). Chapters 6 and 7 reconstruct Paul's responses to these charges and claim that Paul gives all the hallmarks of being traumatized (88). Chapter 8 encourages readers to affirm their own anger and trauma as a first step toward healing.

The third section of the book, Trauma Safe, urges churches to create safe spaces for traumatized individuals. Some of the recommendations in chapter 9 (especially those regarding physical safety) are highly practical in heightening our alertness to actual threats. Chapters 10 through 14 advocate a combination of social-secular shibboleths (boundaries, trust and transparency, mutuality, empowerment, and cultural awareness) and common moral sense. The aspects of these chapters that address normal virtuous interactions are eminently useful, but the authors treat sound moral judgment and practice as if they are discoveries of modern secular-trauma theory. A biblically informed church will already be growing in a healthy practice of mutual love and edification without the help of trauma theory. The final one-chapter section advocates oddly secular ways to beat trauma: "enjoy your hobbies" (224), "get a therapist" (225), "find at least one sage" (226), "support groups" (227), and "friends" (227). If these are the mechanisms that a Christian audience should use to address trauma, the Scriptures in general and Paul in particular appear to be sorely lacking. Gibson and McKnight reject the sufficiency of Scripture to address the soul needs of humanity.

As a general informational read, *Traumatized Church* will remind the conscientious reader that suffering is everywhere in a fallen world. It has numerous shapes, durations, and intensities. And it intersects the human heart in varied ways. McKnight and Gibson urge us not to be glib, indifferent, or oblivious toward trauma. The better we understand the kinds of sorrows and fears that people carry (attunement), the better we will represent the grace of God in the church.

While audience responses to *Traumatized Church* are sure to differ, all should recognize several areas open to dispute. The authors take an integrationist approach. The book advocates an entirely secular psychological view of trauma and trauma counseling (4). Gibson appears to subscribe to Bessel van der Kolk's popular but unproven and unscientific "the-body-keeps-score" theory of trauma (12).[1] The consequence is that the book turns innocent interactions into violent traumatizations, insulates the sinful hearts of self-proclaimed traumatized individuals from biblical critique, and generally panders to the victim culture of modern America. Because of this integrationist psychological mindset, the authors reify trauma as an active force that has power to produce automatic outcomes in a person's life that the individual is powerless to resist (32). This removes a person's heart responses (will, emotions, beliefs) from the equation and absolves him of guilt for what the Scriptures call sin. God's Word appeals to heart change—most often in terms of growth of faith—as the primary means of moving through and past trauma, but this is nearly entirely lacking from *Traumatized Church*.

By casting trauma in entirely subjective terms (the personalized experience of the individual), the authors extend trauma beyond physical events (such as car wrecks, the death of a child, divorce, and sexual assault) to every conceivable emotional, social, spiritual, or physical injury whatsoever (real or imagined, warranted or unwarranted, trivial or severe, brief or extended). These do not constitute the same class of events. Many "traumatized" people need to confront reality. They are sinning by actively responding with fear, anxiety, or depression to the *ordinary* suffering that is prevalent in a fallen world. The fact that their responses are sinful does not make the event itself more painful or the church's responsibility to rebuke, encourage, and comfort any different. The book offers no realistic biblical solutions for the traumatized individual or for the church that is trying to guide him toward spiritual healing. Instead, it urges the church to walk on eggshells and to abet the spiritual and emotional immaturity of its members. Thus, trauma-informed counseling turns the therapist into an enabler. Trauma-informed psychotherapies often do real violence to those who have experienced real trauma by lumping them together with self-absorbed individuals who view any personal reversal or misfortune as "trauma."

Several fallacies weaken the book's main argument that Paul exhibits the signs of personal trauma in his interactions with Corinth. First, since Paul was never *overwhelmed* in his capacity to cope, by definition he was not traumatized. Did he experience severe stress that made him despair even of life? Absolutely. Did he "cope" by the grace and power of God? Undoubtedly. *Traumatized Church* improperly conflates severe stress with a psychologized definition of *trauma*. (Disclaimer: Setting aside the psychologized definition of *trauma*, I would be happy to agree that Paul's experiences both with the Corinthian church and throughout the rest of his missionary endeavors were traumatic in the more general dictionary sense. After all, he spent twenty-four hours clinging to flotsam from a shipwreck! [2 Cor 11:25].) Second, the authors speculate on the text of Scripture and then base further claims on that speculation. For instance, the claim that Paul (possibly, plausibly, probably) fled Corinth due to trauma and took refuge in Ephesus because it was safe is purely speculative. Nothing in Acts (or the

[1] Gibson's privately owned counseling center advocates secular psychotherapies including CBT, EMDR, Mindfulness, Person-Centered, Attachment, and other non-Christian theories but is strangely silent on biblical authority for soul care. See her website, https://www.valorcounselingaz.com/services-1.

letters to Corinth) imply that Paul's leaving Corinth was due to stress. Additionally, given that he fought with beasts at Ephesus (ironically mentioned in 1 Cor 15:32), it is apparent that Ephesus was not a "safe space" for Paul.

The reader will also want to observe two other shortcomings. First, *Traumatized Church* flows with a sustained undercurrent of anti-conservatism. While the authors repeatedly praise women pastors, who are *explicitly* excluded from the pastoral office by Scripture (23, 54, 59, 61, 76), they find the energy to verbally abuse conservative Christians gratuitously and needlessly (109), and they explicitly affirm DEI—slanderously claiming its existence in Scripture (206). In fact, after scanning the book carefully one might conclude that the only specific targets of their attacks (outside of generic traumatizers) are conservative Christians (an interesting juxtaposition given that DEI widely advocates and encourages three actual, violent traumatizers in atheistic Marxism, sexual perversion, and racial injustice). This reversal is ironic given their mentioning of DARVO (deny, attack, reverse victim and offender) in the context of trauma.

The second major shortcoming is an inadequate view of Scripture. While it is true that the narrative portions of Scripture do not always depict imitable examples or what *should* have happened in a particular case, the source material for this book is the Corinthian correspondence. McKnight claims that the apostle Paul is full of "nastiness and defensiveness and avoidance" in his letters to Corinth (13; cf. 38, 41–42). If true, then these letters are hardly authoritative Scripture. The statement that we should "have trauma therapists reading over our shoulders and whispering in our ears if we want to hear accurately what Paul says to the Corinthians" is infelicitous at best and wholly inadequate if actually intended the way it reads (134). It presumes the necessity of postmodern secular pseudosciences for a proper understanding of God's Word. And concluding that "forming trauma-healthy churches is at the root of grace-shaped and Spirit-formed transformation of character" seems to replace the actual gospel, the Holy Spirit, and biblical virtues with a secular pseudo virtue (219).

The portrayal of Paul as suffering from PTSD suffers two major defects (13). First, there was no "post"-ness to the strain he was under when he wrote 1 and 2 Corinthians. Second, there is a complete absence of a disorder. To be disordered, Paul would need to be *inappropriately overreacting* to *non-threatening* situations after the actual threat was long resolved. Instead, Paul was actively addressing a combination of doctrinal and practical threats to the church itself. That is, Paul is clearly less offended by the Corinthians' disposition toward him (except as it affected their view of his apostleship and, thereby, authority to convey God's Word to them) and far more concerned by their moral and spiritual chaos. This is probably a minor quibble, but it may indicate that the authors have become so interested in finding evidence to justify a theory that false equivalences have slipped into their analysis.

Traumatized Church is likely to have the greatest impact on evangelical churches who tend toward integrationist views of counseling or on pastors and counselors who have not previously considered the pervasiveness and depth of sorrow that is represented in the pew every Sunday and their own responsibility to act mercifully in response to that sorrow. All should be aware that the church is full of hurting people. All should understand that we can *cause* that hurt, *feel* that hurt, and *help* that hurt. However, the pervasive integration of secular psychology throughout the book invalidates it as a serious

work for those who accept the orthodox doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture in all matters regarding soul care.

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