



Rev. Dr. Bob Robinson

New Books Worth Reading

THE PLAUSIBILITY PROBLEM

Ed Shaw (IVP, 2015, £8.99, 176 pp, ISBN: 9781783592067)

As Motion 30 discussions continue, this book is a potentially helpful contribution from Britain that has been widely praised in evangelical and other circles there. Its author is both acutely conscious of his own feelings of same-sex attraction, and also committed to what biblical authority and Christian convictions affirm about marriage and sex. In this honest and engaging book, subtitled ‘The Church and Same-Sex Attraction,’ Ed Shaw discloses his pain in dealing with same-sex issues; and yet he is equally convinced that gospel obedience is ultimately the only way to experience life in its God-given fullness. He also shows that the Bible’s teaching can seem unreasonable – not simply because of its inherent difficulties, but because of ‘missteps’ that the church has, intentionally or unintentionally, often taken in its understanding of the Christian life. He means, for example, missteps such as beliefs or implications that ‘Your identity is your sexuality,’ or ‘A family is Mum, Dad and 2.4 children,’ or ‘If you’re born gay, it can’t be wrong to be gay,’ or ‘Sex is where true intimacy is found,’ or ‘Godliness is heterosexuality,’ or ‘Celibacy is bad for you,’ and that ‘Suffering is to be avoided.’ These missteps, Shaw argues, make biblical teaching on sexuality often seem *implausible* (hence the book’s title) and this means that simply defending that teaching is not enough. In other words (and, perhaps not surprisingly), we have been shaped by the world around us, and urgently need to re-examine the values that drive our discipleship. Current debates about sexuality should, Shaw argues, also pose searching questions about whether our churches want to be inclusive families that teach and embody a gospel that defines our identity first and foremost in Christ and not in terms of sexuality. The Director of ‘Reform’ in the UK (Reform is like Latimer but perhaps even more conservative) writes about the book: “This book gives a glimpse of what is possible if we dare to live out what the Bible teaches. It is warm, honest, intellectually robust and seriously challenging.” Another British review adds about Shaw that “the kind of celibate singleness he himself lives out as a same-sex attracted man

is both plausible and fulfilling, and thereby offers hope and encouragement to others in his situation, and courage and wisdom to pastors who want to be equipped to support them.” Two excellent appendices conclude the book: some twenty pages on ‘The plausibility of the traditional interpretation of Scripture,’ and ten pages on ‘The implausibility of the new interpretations of Scripture.’ The book has clearly met a need in Britain: its first (and quite large) printing sold out quickly. Reading it (and the commendations of the book) will provide some readers with their first example of fellow Christians who are candid about living with same-sex attraction but who also refuse to let their bodily hormones trump their biblical hermeneutics.

AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM

Dochuk, Kidd and Peterson, eds (University of Notre Dame Press, 2014, US\$60.00, 518 pp, ISBN: 978-0-268-03842-7)

Your reviewer has been a visiting scholar at three American evangelical seminaries and can affirm the spiritual vibrancy, the intellectual vigour (as well as some apparent cultural blind-spots) of evangelicalism there. This volume is a sizable tribute that both honours American evangelicalism’s leading historian – George Marsden – and also helps explain some of its vibrancy, vigour (and its blind-spots too). The book covers Marsden’s scholarly work and so it spans U.S. intellectual, cultural, and religious history from the seventeenth century (‘Puritan Beginnings’ – with an emphasis on Marsden’s widely-acclaimed *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* from 2003) through to the nineteenth (‘Protestantism’s Century’), the twentieth century (‘Protesting Modernity’ – the rise of fundamentalism and pushback from a chastened evangelicalism, with long discussions of science in general and evolution in particular) and into the twenty-first century. Some aspects of the book might interest or challenge NZ readers more than others. For example, the last two parts of the volume discuss settings that are familiar to us here. Part IV, ‘Pluralism’s Challenge’ is about the secularization that we have also experienced. Part V, ‘Pluralism’s

Blessing' outlines a re-engagement with culture, interaction with society and politics, missional activity, and growing intellectual credibility (not that we have engaged much in those ways). NZ evangelicals who live and work in the tertiary education sector will appreciate chapter 13 with its discussion of Marsden's important volume *The Soul of the American University* (1994) and the even more widely acclaimed *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (1997). Others might reflect on a chapter by one of the few woman contributors: 'Missionary Realities and the New Evangelicalism' by Kathryn Long. And there will be help for anyone interested in what the detailed index shows as other major issues: baptists and presbyterianism, education and fundamentalism; sadly, our Episcopalian colleagues appear to have contributed next to nothing.

GOD KNOWS WHERE THEY COME FROM!

Richard Waugh, Ted Schroder, Steve Lowe and Allan Davidson (2014, \$29.90, 169 pp, ISBN 978-0-473-30156-9) Order via info@craigprint.co.nz

Subtitled 'Four Faith Stories from Hokitika,' this is a book written to help celebrate the West Coast town's 150th anniversary. It tells the stories (in their own words) of four clergy who grew up in Hokitika before becoming: an Anglican minister with an international ministry, a formator of priests (and now a Catholic Bishop), a national Wesleyan church leader, and a Presbyterian church historian. The contributors are: the Revd Ted Schroder, the Revd Dr Richard Waugh, the Revd Father Steve Lowe, and the Revd Dr Allan Davidson (who also provides a long and interesting chapter on 'Goldfields' Religion: Church Life in Hokitika in the Nineteenth Century and Beyond'). Each tells how their faiths were developed by their own church traditions in a small town context in the 1960s and 1970s before then reflecting on their continuing ministries. Latimer readers will probably resonate most with Ted Schroder's story. He became a curate to John Stott at All Soul's and is generally credited with pressing John towards preaching contextually "with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other." Ted later went on to extensive ministry in the USA where he still

pastors. His chapter tells the story of his family upbringing (in Hokitika's Central Hotel owned by his parents), his conversion and subsequent life – with his evangelical credentials and Kiwi nostalgia clearly on display. Overall, this is an interesting and at times even entertaining slice of NZ Christian history that is also well-illustrated with photos.

A TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

Gerald McDermott and Harold Netland (Oxford University Press, 2014, US\$26.96, 352 pp ISBN: 978-0-19-975182-2)

When evangelicals have been asked about 'other faiths,' their response nearly always includes – as it should – an appeal to missionary activism. But we have also been the slowest of the Christian tribes to attempt theological answers to questions about where the living God might be in the world's religions. However, over the last forty or so years, some evangelical scholars have offered orthodox theological discussions of these issues – and McDermott and Netland have been prominent among them. In this volume, subtitled, 'An Evangelical Proposal,' they offer a survey and critical evaluation of current discussions (evangelical as well as mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic) before offering their own comprehensive and Trinitarian-based way forward. Part 1 of the book includes chapters on: 'Theology of Religions and Evangelicals,' 'The Triune God,' 'Revelation and the Religions,' 'Salvation and Conversion,' and 'Christian Witness.' Part 2 is even more interesting in some ways as four other evangelical academics (African, Finnish, Sri Lankan and German) respond and illustrate the debates from their own experience of the Christian encounters with the religions – especially Hinduism and Islam – and debate some of the issues with McDermott and Netland. Even readers with limited initial interest in the topic will benefit from the book. The religions are not going to go away; ignoring, or romanticising, or badmouthing them will not help, but this volume will, especially given that it is uncompromisingly orthodox in its view of God as triune.