



Rev. Dr. Bob Robinson

Books Worth Reading

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MERE APOLOGETICS

Alister McGrath (Baker Books, 2012, US\$16.99, 197pp ISBN: 9780801014161)

Who might be a CS Lewis figure for today—that is, someone who, with effortless grace and plausible intelligence, can commend the faith? This book (with a title that alludes to *Mere Christianity*) suggests that Alister McGrath is a possibility. In Britain, McGrath has been a driving force behind the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics and has written and spoken widely in the area. Subtitled, ‘How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith,’ McGrath starts this volume by outlining the various approaches found in Acts—by which he means that in different contexts there will be differing strategies in defending and commending the faith as Christians both remove obstacles and offer explanations. The parallels with Lewis become apparent as McGrath offers various ‘points of contact’ to initiate dialogue with unbelievers. He appeals to the reasonableness of faith in the light of shared human concerns about morality, justice, beauty, desire, hope, creation, and so on. This is not one of those ‘Here are the hard questions and here are the answers’ kind of books. Rather, it is a book of *method*: how to think about and frame answers to the questions and the worldviews behind them. Another feature is the way in which McGrath acknowledges that both modern and postmodern perspectives shape the worldviews of today’s hearers. (This means, for example, that faith is not about ‘proof’ or ‘certainty’ but about probability or, in the phrase that he especially likes, ‘inference to the best explanation.’) For this reason he advocates different approaches to apologetics—‘gateways’ to faith—that include but extend beyond argument to imaginative explanation in terms of stories and images. Case studies illustrate these various approaches. This reviewer has been teaching apologetics to Laidlaw / Bible College students for a couple of decades now and *Mere Apologetics* is the best text we’ve found for teaching students, young and old, about the *how* of being prayerfully ‘always ready to

give an answer to everyone who asks’ about the reasons for faith (1 Peter 3:15).

DISCOVER ACTS

Stephen Gaukroger (IVP, 2013, £8.99, 208pp ISBN: 9781844749034)

Alongside McGrath on apologetics, it is helpful to set this quite short but readable and engaging commentary on Acts. As Gaukroger points out, the world in which Acts is set is very like our world today in many ways: ‘Now we find ourselves in a culture of competing worldviews, religions and ideologies, all clamouring for our attention. Christian faith is thought by many simply to have no relevance to a progressive contemporary lifestyle. How like the first-century world!’ In other words, Acts is set in a world similar to ours with its devious politicians, sexual confusion, and multiple national and tribal gods. So, as Gaukroger points out, ‘*our* world needs changing. And the stories of Acts point the way. Prescriptive as well as descriptive, this part of holy Scripture travels across the centuries to challenge the values and preoccupations of our third-millennium world. There has been no better time to study the book of Acts.’ Agreed!

HOPE IN AN AGE OF DESPAIR

Jonathan Moo and Robert White (IVP, 2013, £11.99, 224pp ISBN: 9781844748778)

To continue with apologetics, one ‘point of contact’ with those outside the faith is surely shared concern for issues such as environmental trends, including climate change, global population growth and unrestrained and unsustainable consumption. How should Christians respond, especially given the Bible’s vision of the future of creation? Jonathan Moo is a Biblical scholar Robert White is a scientist; together they assess the dangers to the planet and conclude that there is huge reason for concern about what they call a crisis unprecedented in its scale and in the

severity of its effects. They also note the way that film-makers, environmentalists, politicians and even scientists of repute increasingly employ apocalyptic language to warn about the magnitude of these threats to the future of life on our planet. Nonetheless, Moo and White argue that the Christian gospel offers a radically distinctive view of the future in terms of the relationships between God and a creation that includes both us and the planet that we live on and care for. They argue that the Bible's vision of the future of all of creation makes a radical difference now to how we live and how we respond to the challenges that we planet-carers face (hence the book's subtitle, 'The gospel and the future of life on earth'). They base their response on a careful analysis of key biblical passages such as Romans 8, 2 Peter 3, and Luke 12. (This excellent volume nicely complements Dick Tripp's *Caring for Creation* that was commended in the last issue of *Latimer Focus*.)

THE TRANSFORMING TRINITY

Elizabeth McQuoid (IVP, 2013, £4.99, 80pp ISBN: 9781844749065)

Although the word 'Trinity' is never used in the Bible, there is no doubting the 'threeness' of our one God. But, as McQuoid points out in this very helpful set of seven studies, in practice we often ignore the doctrine. For example, Christians may focus on one person of the Trinity to the exclusion of the other two. 'We fall into the trap of seeing the Father as the God of the Old Testament and Jesus as the God of the New. We make a distinction between Word and Spirit, assuming it's OK for some Christians to be open to the Spirit while others rely on the Word.' I also like one of her major conclusions: as we grow in our understanding of God as triune we will learn to worship him more fully, reflect his image more clearly and experience his transforming power in our lives as we better learn to know the Father, follow the Son, and walk in the Spirit. In other words, she wants to restore God as Trinity to a central place in the heart, mind and spirit of today's Christian. These short studies, subtitled 'Rediscovering the heart of our faith' will help that to happen.

THE MESSAGE OF DANIEL

Dale Ralph Davis (IVP, 2013, £9.99, 176pp ISBN: 9781844748013)

This reviewer is surprised at the way in which some fellow Christians are willing uncritically to entertain fringe Christian opinions from a few of the new free-to-air TV channels. One, in particular, seems to have a number of presentations on the books of Revelation and Daniel, replete with bizarre speculation and the seeing of supposed parallels with or 'fulfilments' of present and future politics and culture. But, at least for the book of Daniel, help is at hand in this new addition to IVP's 'The Bible Speaks Today' series. It is written by an American Presbyterian pastor who has been a professor of OT at a Reformed Seminary in the US—which is why we are assured of an interpretation that is in harmony with the message of Scripture as a whole, even when the book is Daniel. Davis, obviously a capable preacher, explains the background to Daniel, sifts through interpretative issues (some of them quite problematical) and then offers a faithful exposition of the book's message. Recommended.

POPCULTURED

Steve Turner (IVP, 2013, £10.99, 256pp ISBN: 9781844749058)

'We've been popcultured' says the British Christian poet and writer, Steve Turner, about life today. He introduces this engaging volume by saying that: 'For most of my life I've not only consumed popular culture but also I've helped make some and have interviewed many people from the worlds of music, film, comedy, fashion, television, art, poetry and literature. At the same time I've tried to make sense of it all through a Christian understanding.' For such an understanding he uses the method advocated by Karl Barth who told his students, 'Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret the newspaper from your Bible.' Subtitled, 'Thinking Christianly about style, media and entertainment,' Turner's book opens with short chapters on 'Why we should care' about such leisure pursuits, followed by some helpful definitions and then a

discussion of the Biblical foundations on which he bases his critique. He then discusses popular culture in chapters that range over topics from film, journalism, celebrity culture and fashion, to comedy (described as '*laughs, lies and truth*'), advertising, technology and television. If both Paul and Jesus could use their cultures as springboards for the Gospel, why shouldn't we? And if we want to follow their examples, this volume by Turner (even though its examples are usually British or American) offers a well-informed biblical and theological guide to how we might do it.

Finally, two rather more solid studies.

DICTIONARY OF JESUS AND THE GOSPELS

J. B. Green, J. K. Brown & N. Perrin (eds.) (IVP, 2013, £44.99, 996pp ISBN: 9781844748761)

What can be more important for the Christian than Jesus and our key source of knowledge of him: the Gospels? Here's a new edition of what has become *the* well-informed evangelical authority in the field, subtitled: 'A compendium of contemporary biblical scholarship.' The publisher states that 'nearly all of the 175 articles from critically acclaimed 1992 first edition have been rewritten to reflect developments since 1992.' The nearly one thousand pages centre on 'the Gospels, key episodes in the life of Jesus, significant background topics, and issues and methods of interpretation in the context of developments in Jesus and Gospels studies since 1992' including 'a heightened interest in the contribution of each Gospel writer to the various subjects explored in the dictionary.' The number and global range of the authors has been expanded and the articles include newer emphases that shed new light on the interpretation of the Gospels. For example, there has been new research on the beliefs and practices of first-century Judaism, or Judaisms, the Greco-Roman world, the role of empire in the Gospels. There has also been a turn towards what is called 'theological interpretation' (actually the usual way before modernist corrosions) that rightly emphasises the theological character of the

Gospels and the difference it makes when we read the Gospels from within the faith commitments of God's people. And, these days, the scholars work away at 'plugging the Gospels into the story of Israel and the theme of exile and restoration. This approach is genuinely illuminating. We need this pressure to read the message of Jesus and the Gospels within the grand story of God's agenda with God's people, not least as a counter to the ease with which we read stories from the Gospel against the backdrop of our own experiences and stories.' So, an excellent resource for those who really want to go deeper into the Gospels and the Messiah to whom they faithfully witness.

ONE BODY

Alexander Pruss (University of Notre Dame Press, 2013, US\$45.00 (paper), 465pp ISBN: 9780268038977)

This is a heavy-weight philosophical-theological reflection on the nature of love, sexuality and marriage; its subtitle is 'An essay in Christian sexual ethics.' Pruss is obviously a Christian and, although he teaches philosophy at the prestigious Baptist Baylor University, it's not possible (for this reviewer) to discern which stream of Christianity he belongs to. He begins with a discussion of the different forms of love, such as parental, collegial, filial, friendly and fraternal before an even more detailed analysis of romantic love, especially the fundamental idea that romantic love pursues union of two persons as one body (hence the title of the book: *One Body*). He then moves on to the nature of marriage and applies his conclusions to contested ethical questions, such as the precise connection between love, sex, and commitment, and the moral issues related to contraception, same-sex activity, and reproductive technology. A philosophical colleague from Princeton University says that the book is 'quite simply the best work on Christian sexual ethics that I have seen... Moreover, it is filled with arguments with which even secular writers on sexual morality will have to engage and come to terms.' Given our church's widespread confusion over sexual ethics, at least some of Latimer's theologians ought to be reading this lengthy, challenging and rewarding volume.