



Rev. Dr. Bob Robinson

New Books Worth Reading

GOD IN THE WHIRLWIND

David F Wells (IVP, 2014, £11.54, 272pp ISBN: 9781783590339)

From the 'Only in America' file: in the early 1990s, a very well-endowed foundation sets aside a bucketful of money for three theologians to answer a question that many Kiwi Anglicans, including church leaders, seem unable or unwilling to ask: "What is it that accounts for the loss of the church's theological character?" Meaning: why do we as a church succumb so quickly to what our culture wants rather than persist with what the Great Tradition of our faith tells us? (Or, the opposite fault, how do we avoid becoming an inward-looking ghetto that speaks only to itself?) One of the recipients of the grants was an evangelical academic, David Wells, who found that to answer the initial question about the loss of the church's theological character he needed four sizable volumes: *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (1993), *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (1994), *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (1998), and *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (2004)—with all four of these summed up in his more accessible *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (2008). But even these left Wells (and at least some of his readers) dissatisfied and still asking "Why has the church, including its evangelical portion, become like this?" Wells offers an answer in this way: "The more I have been engaged with what has happened in West-ern culture, the clearer has become my understanding of what has been principally lost in the evangelical church. It is our understanding of God's character but an understanding in which that character has 'weight'" (14). The book's subtitle, 'How the holy-love of God reorients our world,' states his central theme that is developed in chapters with titles such as 'God Our Vision, Culture Our Context,' 'The Gospel Across Time,' 'The Love Of God,' 'The Splendour of Holiness' and others that re-emphasise the Incarnation and Cross, and assess worship and service in their light. At times, the American context will be distracting for readers on these shores; nonetheless, this is a practical theology that calls

for the church's faith and practice to be utterly God-centred. Wells is a Congregationalist—not an Anglican—but this reviewer couldn't help thinking both of our own denomination and another famous Congregationalist, PT Forsyth, who said to the church of his day: "When within us we have nothing above us we soon succumb to what is around us." The call for constant encounter with the One that Scripture calls "the living God" is at the heart of this challenging volume.

YOU CAN PRAY

Tim Chester (IVP, 2014, £6.39, 176pp ISBN: 9781783590841)

When Chester, an experienced church leader in Britain, called for questions about prayer in his blog, he was not ready for the number and range of the concerns he heard: 'Do my prayers really make a difference?' 'Is prayer more often a therapeutic method that helps us to work through our emotions?' 'What are the inner workings of prayer from God's perspective?' 'How do you stop yourself being distracted and letting your mind wander off God?' 'I sometimes feel like I'm being selfish if I ask for myself.' 'Does God mind if I can't think what to say?' And so on. His book is, I think, one of the very best that I've read and for one central reason: Chester's remedy for faltering prayer is to make it God-centred (meaning Trinitarian) from beginning to end. In fact, it's worth quoting him: "The secret of great praying has nothing to do with human effort or skill. Plenty of people would like to think it does because they want to make prayer an achievement. They want to be able to think of themselves as great pray-ers. But, surprising as it may seem, the secret of great praying is this. You need to know three things about God: 1. God the Father loves to hear us pray. 2. God the Son makes every prayer pleasing to God. 3. God the Holy Spirit helps us as we pray. If you know these three things, then every prayer you pray will be a great prayer." Chester then builds on these foundations in his three-part book with its headings: A. Why prayer is easy (how we pray). B. Why prayer is difficult (why we pray). C. What we pray—and with chapters that explain each of these starting points. Whether the average Kiwi Christian today will be patient enough to read some 180

pages of such guidance is another question. But pastors and other teachers and leaders will find this to be an excellent resource.

AS LONG AS THE EARTH ENDURES

Edited by Jonathan Moo and Robin Routledge (IVP, 2014, £15.39, 256pp ISBN: 9781783590384)

This book's origins are not entirely clear but its quality is everywhere apparent. Subtitled 'The Bible, creation and the environment,' it begins with an excellent survey of the doctrine of creation by Alister McGrath who, among other things, deals with the usual charge of evangelical weakness in this area by pointing out how any one area of Christian doctrine inevitably connects with every other area; this means that creation can never be sidelined in good theology. He also makes a strong case for seeing theology as "discipleship of the mind" so that, through revelation, we come to see things as God sees them—and then behave accordingly towards, for example, the created world. The chapters that follow McGrath's include detailed studies in Genesis 1 and other Old Testament passages before moving on to New Testament themes, theological discussion (including eschatology and hope) and one scientific discussion (the veteran geneticist Professor Sam Berry worrying that Christian disputing of evolution discourages creation care). All of the writers—eight British, two American and two Australian—apply their findings to ecological concerns about a world they see as both beautiful and broken, a world that calls us to share the divine commitment to creation and the environment for "as long as the earth endures" (Genesis 8:22). Following on from the Biblically-based volumes on creation care reviewed in the last *Latimer Focus*, this is a further reminder that the Lordship of Christ extends over the whole of life.

THE MESSAGE OF JEREMIAH

Chris Wright (IVP, 2014, £9.35, 448 pp ISBN: 9781783590322)

Preachers and teachers face two challenges when offering sermons or studies on the book

of Jeremiah: it is the second longest in the Bible (after Psalms) and to understand its message requires a grasp—perhaps a detailed grasp—of a devastating time in Israel's history: a forty year period leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem. Although this is the latest in the very helpful 'The Bible Speaks Today' series, this fine volume by Chris Wright actually replaces an older item in the series—and very successfully too. The 34 chapters of Wright's book cover the 52 chapters of the prophet and, as might be expected from this accomplished teacher and preacher, there is both clarity and conviction in this readable volume (with readers needing to remember that the series aims at careful and relevant exposition rather than detailed exegesis). Wright's own chapter titles hint at his engaging style; for example, 'From honeymoon to divorce' (on Jeremiah 2:1 - 3:5), 'Tears in heaven' (on 8:4 - 10:25), 'Broken covenant and broken hearts' (11:1 - 12:17), 'An unwearable people and an unbearable future' (13:1-27), 'The pit of self-pity' (15:10-21), 'Silver-lined loneliness' (16:1-21), 'The good, the bad and the ugly' (24:1 - 25:39), 'The surprises of grace' (30:1 - 31:1), 'The strengths of love' (31:2-30)—and so on. It was interesting for this reviewer to read David Wells' volume and this exposition at the same time because both are utterly God-centred. As Wright says, "If Jeremiah spoke in his day, and if the book still speaks today, in both cases it is because of the God who called the man to speak and commanded the book to be written. So we must encounter the God of Jeremiah – an encounter that should be both profoundly disturbing and ultimately reassuring, as it was for him. In the end, Jeremiah is a book of the victory of God's love and grace." Wright offers his exposition to preachers and teachers who need "in John Stott's words, to exercise the faculty of 'double-listening' – listening to the word, and listening to the world. We listen to the word of God (from Jeremiah, who more than any other prophet uses that phrase) in order to receive, believe, learn and submit to it. We listen to the world in order to understand it and know the contexts into which God still speaks today through his word. Bringing word and world together, bridging the historical and cultural gap, by explaining the first and engaging the second – that is the task of all biblical interpretation and preaching." Amen to that!