



Rev. Dr. Bob Robinson

New Books Worth Reading

EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Michael F. Bird (Zondervan, 2013, US\$50, 912pp
ISBN: 9780310494416)

“At last! A solid, degree-level, evangelical theology I can really affirm and use”—was my reaction after I had my first good look at this book. It’s written by an Australian, Michael Bird, who teaches at Ridley College, Melbourne. For the past twenty years I’ve been waiting for a robustly evangelical theology that is strongly biblical but that doesn’t buy into the American culture-wars or assert a partisan Arminianism or Calvinism that excludes other evangelicals. Subtitled ‘A Biblical and Systematic Introduction,’ this book is thoroughly biblical (Bird brings his reputation as a very fine NT scholar to the task). And yet it is biblical in a novel way because Bird intends that the book’s “content, structure, and substance is singularly determined by the evangel.” Bird’s strengths as a writer of theology are many. He writes clearly, organises his material well, and helps a reader with tables, sidebars, discussion questions and summary ‘What to Take Home’ conclusions. Mike also brings two other virtues that might help commend an otherwise dauntingly massive volume. First, there is his sense of humour; true, it borders on the lark at times (the man is, after all, a converted Aussie paratrooper whose book on women in church ministry is called *Bourgeois Babes, Bossy Wives, and Bobby Haircuts: A Moderate Case for Gender Equality in Ministry!*). Jokes, witty asides and quirky stories do actually help the readability of a 900+ page book that’s printed in a quite small font. Second, he makes clear his own mixed ecclesial journey. He describes himself as “an ex-Baptist post-Presbyterian Anglican.” He also affirms that he is Calvinist, “a mere evangelical” and even a “catholic evangelical” because, as he quotes from Kevin Vanhoozer, the qualifier “catholic ... prohibits any one reception of the gospel from becoming paramount.” (Some Latimer readers might also be reassured that among the first enthusiastic reviewers has been Michael Jensen, recently of Moore College, and now a Sydney Rector.) Your reviewer has two mild criticisms. Despite a generally Reformed approach to eschatology

(with its sane exegesis of apocalyptic passages in Scripture) and his embrace of what the Reformed tradition calls “progressive revelation,” he has—with an American publisher and audience in mind?—felt he needs to include a chapter on ‘Millennium and Tribulation’ that tediously surveys a range of speculations that Bird himself concedes are of decidedly secondary importance (and that his own Reformed heritage usually deals with quite sharply and dismissively, if at all!). And, given the presence of Islam in today’s world, and religious plurality generally, it is disappointing to read such a large theological volume, with its fairly frequent reminders of ministry and mission, that only very briefly mentions the challenges of religion and the religions. Nonetheless, having now had nearly a year of teaching based—in part—on students closely reading *Evangelical Theology I*, for one, offer it a huge welcome.

SIMPLY GOD

Peter Sanlon (IVP, 2014, £11.99, 240 pp,
ISBN: 9781783591046)

It’s interesting that the past three issues of ‘New Books Worth Reading’ have each had volumes on the utter centrality of Christian belief in God (meaning the biblical and traditional Christian affirmation of God as a triune God of love)—and here is a fourth that may be the best of them. Such praise relates in part to how well the book is written (Sanlon is an English vicar with both a Cambridge PhD and credentials as a former political speech-writer) but mainly because the author relentlessly avoids the chummy niceness of the social trinitarianisms that are currently popular. In their place the book (subtitled ‘Recovering the classical Trinity’) turns to the rather more stark—and much more biblical—Augustine, and others such as the great American puritan, Jonathan Edwards, to help a reader gain a balanced view of both the divine simplicity, unity, timelessness and so on (the chapters in Part One) before he rounds this out in Part Two with a strongly biblical account of God’s relational and triune love. And Sanlon does all of this restating of the classical Christian view of God in a clear and

jargon-free way. Moreover, the sparkling titles of his chapter sections could launch many a sermon, perhaps illustrated by means of his concluding reflections on the simplicity-relationality balance (as he applies them to topics such as entertainment, work and ministry, religious freedoms, mission and church. For once the clichés are true: this book really is both a delight to the mind and food for the soul.

FRUITFULNESS ON THE FRONTLINE

Mark Greene (IVP, 2014, £8.99, 208 pp, ISBN: 9781783591251)

Written by the Director of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (founded by John Stott), and subtitled 'Making a Difference Where You Are,' this book takes the important biblical theme of 'fruitfulness' (John 15) and asks what this might actually mean in the daily lives of Christian people. One theme constantly pushed by the London Institute is what it calls 'The Great Divide': What would happen if the 98% of Christians who are not in church-paid work were actually trained for and engaged in mission in their everyday lives. Just imagine if they were So, how does God wish to work in and through us in our daily lives? That is the question that Greene asks and answers in this readable book with a mix of fresh Biblical teaching, practical insight, wit, and stories from daily and working life that constantly affirm both God's grace and his greatness as God calls on his people to join what Greene calls God's "glorious, transforming work" in the world. This is not a "the only reason for life and work is to evangelise" kind of volume. But neither is it a creation-based theology of work (see Greene's *Thank God it's Monday* for that; or the books by Christchurch's Alistair Mackenzie). It is a hard book to summarise; but, at the very least, it will surely enthuse Christians for daily life in which, at work, and home, and everywhere else, we can and will encounter the living God in what is, after all, a God-saturated world.

LIVING THOUGHTFULLY, DYING WELL

Glen Miller (MennoMedia, 2014, US\$12.99, 170 pp ISBN: 9780836198898)

One major concern among a previous generation of Christians was: "Will I have a good death?" Perhaps more likely today are more pragmatic questions such as: "How will I die? Will I suffer? How will my family cope?" In this book, subtitled 'A Doctor Tells How to Make Death a Natural Part of Life,' a retired American physician offers some wise Christian answers. Several features combine to make this a fine book. Miller is a Mennonite—part of that courageous, humble, hard-working, mission-oriented denomination. Although he was prompted to write the volume after he himself suffered a heart attack, his extensive medical and hospital-management experience (both in the US and around the world) alert him to a range of medical and other practical issues. (His speciality was internal medicine which included the care of many dying patients; obviously some of the details about American and Canadian health-care are a little different to ours.) He stresses the need for practical preparation, both by individuals and by their families, for the inevitability of death. Each of the book's nine chapters ends with discussion questions that could help readers both to anticipate and to ease some of the inevitable stress and emotion that surround death, even for Christian people. Miller's book helpfully updates an older—and less anxious?—Christian perspective that dying can be and is a 'natural' part of life.