



Rev. Dr. Bob Robinson

Books Worth Reading

POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE

Ian Coffey (IVP, 2015, £7.99, 144pp, ISBN: 9781783592050)

One traditionally trying pastoral and personal issue is the felt absence of God during difficult times. This book engagingly retells the stories of eight people in scripture who felt the same way. The subtitle ('Finding God in Hard Places') indicates the theme, and chapter titles indicate people and topics: 'Esther and courage,' 'Jeremiah and inadequacy,' 'John and doubt,' 'Paul and fear,' 'Peter and imprisonment,' 'Ruth and loss,' 'Elijah and despair,' 'Mark and failure.' As well as guiding readers through the biblical material, Coffey offers contemporary examples of Christians facing the same sorts of struggles and his hope is that, like the biblical characters he surveys, believers today might also find a renewed intimacy with God even in the darkest of days. This is an honest book that offers neither glibly reassuring answers nor vague hopefulness.

GOD DWELLS AMONG US

G K Beale and Mitchell Kim (IVP, 2015, £11.99, 208pp, ISBN: 9781783591916)

One of the key starting points of this book is that the Old Testament repeatedly and deeply longs for the tangible presence of the living God. This desire is implied in the Garden of Eden, the ark of the covenant and its tabernacle, and by the temple; it is even evoked by the poignant ruins of the temple. God's response to this longing is not only to provide these vehicles or symbols of his presence but to do so with a challenging twist – he forms a people who are called to be God's very temple thus (as the book's subtitle puts it), 'Expanding Eden to the Ends of the Earth' so that God's presence can be enjoyed by all the peoples of the world. Once this point is understood then the chapter titles become understandable: 'Eden as a Temple,' 'Expanding Eden,' 'Eden Lost?' through to 'Eden Rebuilt' (Jesus as the New Temple in the Gospels), 'Eden Expanding' (on the church as

the new Temple) and so on, before ending with some concluding practical reflections. This is a richly biblical and God-centred volume whose readability is helped by the way the content has been preached and delivered at conferences.

DIVINE SEX

Jonathan Grant (Brazos Press, 2015, 256pp, US\$12.97, ISBN: ISBN-13: 978-1587433696)

Jonny Grant is the fairly-recently appointed Vicar of St. Paul's, Symonds Street, Auckland, after a career in law and banking. In this book – subtitled 'A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age' – he writes with informed passion about the growing gap between Christian and secular understandings of sex and sexuality. The book is in two parts. In Part I, Grant draws on cultural and other research to explain how much of the contemporary world understands sex: in effect, as an expression of the self, an act of freedom, a consumer choice. He writes that sex has been "separated from the social contexts that had traditionally given it its essential meaning. Sex has been redefined as a separate, autonomous entity in its own right, an independent commodity that can be reclassified under any category." This has occurred in five phases: the separation of sex from procreation, then from marriage, then from intimate partnership, then separation from another person (through the explosion of online pornography), and finally from our own bodies (through questioning the God-given categories of "male" and "female"). The research behind these opening chapters includes, for example, the neuroscience that shows that the differences between the infatuation stage and the commitment stage of a relationship are so stark that they show up in brain scans; and the sociological research that marrying later, after frequent cohabitation, actually leads to less satisfying marriages. All of this enables us to understand the confusion that surrounds sexuality and prevents people from even grasping the traditional Christian viewpoint. (And these are

relevant to discussion of gay sexuality as well.) Then, in Part II, Grant sets out the alternative: what he calls a “comprehensive Christian vision for sexuality” with its biblical and theological foundations (gender as part of God’s present and future kingdom), formational practices (sexuality needing to mature) and missional consequences (our sexuality to witness to our wholeness as gendered beings made in God’s image). In both parts of the book his chapters are grounded in his own pastoral experience as many examples from his own pastoral experience with young adults, often together with Esther his wife, make movingly clear. He sets out an attractive – but not easy – vision of sexual wholeness for would-be disciples. *Divine Sex* is an excellent book but may not count as easy reading for some. Its origin as a Masters’ thesis is discernible in its discussion of “secular liturgies,” “thick practices,” “enchantment,” and “social imaginaries” (and its indebtedness to the thought of the philosopher Charles Taylor). However, its firm biblical and theological foundations, its poignant narrative and research dimensions, and its pastoral honesty, combine in a very satisfying way. Some readers might think that the first part of the book is the more important and for two reasons: the traditional view of sexuality is equally well presented elsewhere but is there a better analysis available of why the traditional view is rejected as implausible? And where that rejection has come from in western culture? And the second reason is that a current question, “Why has the NZ church arrived at its present confused state about gay issues?” finds at least part of an answer in the persuasive cultural analysis of the first half of *Divine Sex*. The foreword comments that “this is a book that needed to be written” – for pastors and parents, for those who are single and for those who are married. “And it is a must-read for anyone working with young people today; it should be read by youth pastors and university chaplains.” Agreed!

DIG DEEPER INTO THE GOSPELS

Andrew Sach and Tim Hiorns (IVP, 2015, £9.99, 224pp, ISBN: 9781783591992)

The book’s subtitle, ‘Coming Face to Face with Jesus in Mark,’ neatly expresses what this excellent study book wants to do: to confront a reader with “the most important things that have ever happened in the history of the world.” The creative genius of the ‘Dig Deeper’ series is to provide a series of interactive tools in ‘The Bible Toolkit.’ These constantly ask just the right questions with the right amount of background to enable the depths of Mark’s Gospel to be made clear. Yet another virtue: not many commentaries work as a resource for individual and group and preaching preparation – but this one does. I notice that Latimer’s Australian friend, Peter Adam, is also enthusiastic about the book.

A DEFENSE OF DIGNITY

Christopher Kaczor (University of Notre Dame Press, 2013, US\$30, 232pp, ISBN: 978-0-268-03326-2; E-ISBN 978-0-268-08460-8)

Abortion and euthanasia – and all the surrounding issues of freedom of conscience – are two continuing debates in NZ that directly relate to threats to human dignity. Subtitled ‘Creating Life, Destroying Life, and Protecting the Rights of Conscience,’ this volume by an American philosopher makes an appeal to “natural law” (that we Protestants can accept as a mix of general revelation, the observation-based dimensions of the wisdom genre of scripture, and common-sense realism) that appeals to Scripture and theology cannot apply in a secularised society. Kaczor argues for the “intrinsic dignity of every human being and their subsequent protection” and does so over a wide range of topics. He starts with ectopic pregnancies, and the ethics of embryo “rescue” in human or artificial wombs. He then

moves on to end of life issues (doctor-assisted suicide, provision of food and water to patients in a persistent vegetative state, organ donation after death). And he concludes with the conscience issues surrounding health-care professionals who cannot act in ways they see as degrading to the dignity of patients. Bioethics is taught in a number of NZ universities – but not usually, it seems, from the perspective of natural law. Kaczor’s approach, however, is highly readable, clearly argued, thoroughly aware of complexity and ambiguity, and aware of what critics can and do say to such an approach. At least some of us ought to read and consider using this resource in the public square.
