
Book Reviews

Why do Christians find it hard to grieve?

Geoff Walters, Paternoster Press, 203 pp., £12.99

This book, by the senior pastor of Ashford Baptist Church, addresses the issue suggested by the title and it is written out of the fulcrum of pastoral experience. The central thesis is that for many grieving believers, their understanding of the Christian faith, instead of bringing comfort in time of bereavement, has imposed a sense of guilt and denial. He has drawn from the teaching of the Old Testament and New. He has examined at length the approach of Plato and Augustine, with a critical review which charges them, (and particularly Augustine) with the responsibility for the denial and suppression of grief that has gained currency today. There is a great deal of pastoral wisdom needed at the time of crushing bereavement. To cry with those who cry at such bitter times is an experience few of us relish and we are persuaded that such empathy helps the bereaved and us as well. Do we grieve well? These are not easy issues. But does this book help us?

I finished reading the book both dissatisfied and disappointed. It is a scholarly work for which Mr Walters gained his PhD. It is not written from a popular point of view and those determined to read this will struggle to complete it. Reading this did not have a beneficial effect upon me. My impression was that this was a book written for academia. The concessions that he makes to the higher critical movement as regards to the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch early on in the book worried me. For example, on page 16 he talks of "a commonly accepted

explanation in terms of source critical theory." That kind of statement tended to fill the book, with an eye to the supervisor of the thesis rather than for the reader of the book. There is a denial of the immortality of the soul, the thesis being that this is a Platonic Augustinian theory. There is not great paradigm shift between this and conditional immortality. That is never stated directly, but this is where such emphases inevitably lead to. What was not said in the book seemed to dominate what was. I was left unpersuaded of the central thesis that the Platonic Augustinian approach has suppressed grief. Such suppression where it occurs can be explained in terms of cultural reserve. There can be no doubt as to the sincerity of the author but this work will have limited usefulness and needs to be read with care. Limited budget believers can give this a miss.

Geoff Gobbett

A grief sanctified – Love, loss and hope in the Life of Richard Baxter

Jl Packer, Crossway Books, 208 pp, £6.99

The savage loss of a loved one is the most painful of experiences that a human being can go through, and each of us needs to be prepared well in advance for such a traumatic experience. Death is no friend to any of us and it is the enemy that our Saviour has destroyed. This is a very intimate account of the love match between Richard Baxter and his beloved wife, Margaret. She died on 14th June 1681 aged 45. They had been married for nineteen years. He was twenty years older

than her. Within a space of a few weeks, Richard was writing a brief history of her life, how they met and their married life together. This undertaking was an essential part of the grieving process. This did for Baxter what *A Grief Observed* did for C.S. Lewis two hundred and seventy years later. The story is well told and moving to read. Baxter wrote out of a broken heart, and this makes the book very affecting to read. It does show us an age now long past and how poorer we are today for that. One is staggered at the work and writing schedule Richard undertook before the age of word processors. He enters into personal judgements that us moderns wince at, but there is a comely frankness about Richard that one finds refreshing, if not a little embarrassing. One quote will suffice. "And the pleasing of a wife is no easy task. There is an unsuitableness in the best and the wisest and most alike. Faces are not so unlike as the apprehensions of the mind. They that agree in religion, in love and interest. Yet may have different apprehensions about occasional occurrences. Persons, things, words etc."

This personal odyssey makes it evident that Baxter knew himself, and his writing was an aid that showed this to a marked degree. Packer has evident affection for Baxter. In the closing chapter he gives three reasons why this book saw the light of day. Firstly, he wanted us to meet his friend, Richard Baxter who evidently and plainly worked at his puritan marriage, and who became a widower grieving for his dear one. Secondly, he wanted to show us the puritan ideal for marriage and how much this is in contrast with today. Thirdly, to show us the Christian way of handling grief that bereavement inevitably brings. All of us are to face it and it is well to be prepared. This book goes a long way to do that. This is highly recommended and a worthy

addition to your library when comes the sad day when help is needed as is offered here.

Geoff Gobbett

Picking Up the Pieces

David Hilborn

Hodder and Stoughton, 322pp, £8.99

David Hilborn is a minister at the City Temple in London and also works as Theological Consultant of the Evangelical Alliance. In this impressive tour de force he challenges both the reductionist tendencies of "post-evangelicals" and the protectionist tendencies of traditional Evangelicals. This statement of a "third way" will not please everybody, many of our cherished preferences, including "expository preaching", are challenged. However, I was impressed by David Hilborn's honest attempt to respond creatively rather than emotively react to changing trends in our society. The book concludes with his "Agenda for Postmodern Evangelicalism", in which he seeks to stimulate us to "meet the challenges of postmodernity without diverting into the vagaries of post-evangelicalism". Here is a book to keep us on our toes!

The Meaning of Freedom

J Andrew Kirk

Paternoster Press, 262pp, £12.99

This is a well researched and beautifully written exploration of the subject of Freedom. Kirk compares and contrasts the differing approaches to freedom in history, the contemporary world, Islam and Christianity. Clarifying the basis and nature of personal freedom is one of the main challenges in our increasingly relativistic generation. No longer are people asking "is it true?" Rather the predominant question will be "does it feel good?" Kirk underlines the fact that true freedom can only be experienced

within the context of truth. It is worth noting his statement that the gospel would not be good news if it was not true news. Here is a book which will stimulate of our thinking and aid us in our attempts to evangelize our “free” thinking contemporaries.

John Wood

Virtual Morality

Graham Houston

Apollos, 1998, 224 pp, £14.99

This is a rare and a brave book which deserves to succeed. It handles two unfamiliar topics and seeks to bring them together. Virtual Reality [VR] is the use of computer technology to create an artificial space/time universe which simulates but can extend and mould reality for those who can experience it. Christian Ethics is, for evangelicals at least, the use of revealed Biblical principles to consider what is right and wrong in human conduct. [At the sharp end we are all doing this but as a theoretical discipline it remains a specialist field.]

Dr Houston wrote his PhD thesis on the application of Christian Ethics to VR and this book is the fruit of his study. It has the merits of a scholarly work, with some searching analysis of the philosophy of technology in the context of postmodernity. Although not an easy read, it is a valuable exercise, as there has been so little work done by evangelicals in this field.

While most of us think of VR as being an entertainment medium there are well chosen examples here of its use in medicine, architecture and museums. There are also timely warnings about cyber-sex, child abuse and the sheer individualism of VR as the ultimate artificiality in fleeing from the real world of human relationships.

At one level, of course, technology, is value free but Houston argues that the kind of world envisaged by the VR technologist

necessarily assumes its own set of values. It is how and why God’s creatures use the complex tools now available to them which is the proper subject of ethical enquiry. That is why Houston is right to set VR against the background of Biblical anthropology and also of eschatology. Christians are meant to be witnesses in the here and now to the reality of the new heavens and the new earth, which are for us not virtual constructs but living realities!

If for no other reason this book is useful in providing [pp. 75-85] a more accessible introduction to Oliver O’Donovan’s ethical insights than his own somewhat opaque 1994 work, “Resurrection and Moral Order”. Chapter Five tackles the difficult area of “Christian Ethics as Public Truth”, where the author follows Lesslie Newbigin in looking for ways to use distinctively Christian principles which could be validly applied to secular conduct. I wish I could say that he succeeds but I fear he does not. While these efforts are helpful in encouraging Christians to witness to their colleagues, confident in the Bible’s self-authenticating truth claims, they cannot address the blindness of fallen nature which neither sees nor feels the weight of this evidence.

I have other reservations, too. Calvin is made to sound more Barthian than he was [p. 23] and Ephesians 2:14 is applied to the unity of the human family rather than that of the redeemed community [p. 87].

More and more evangelicals, however, are working in the IT industry today and this book will give them a lot to think about. Our contemporary culture is bringing with it a lot of suspicious baggage and, read with care, Houston will help us to think through this stuff. But it does not come with a yellow cover because it is not for Dummies.

Alan Gibson
