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## Editor's Notes

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Neither this journal nor its parent body, the British Evangelical Council, is distinctively reformed. The BEC is an evangelical body to which Calvinists and Arminians can belong. But there is no doubt that the reformed faith has had and continues to have a profound influence in the BEC constituency. Some of its constituent bodies are confessionally reformed while others owe much to the renewal of reformed faith and life in the 20th century. Therefore the health of reformed theology is vitally important for our churches. I would like to mention several recent books that help us understand the state of reformed theology today as well as one older work.

The first book is **Donald McKim's *Introducing the Reformed Faith*** (Westminster John Knox Press 2001). McKim is somewhat notorious in evangelical circles as the McKim of the Rogers/McKim proposal on biblical authority in the 1980s. He is a conservative Barthian and this comes through in the book, not least in his catechism that is included. Nevertheless McKim is relatively fair in his presentation of the reformed faith. Intended as a primer of the reformed faith for thoughtful 'lay people', the book is organised like a systematic theology. He begins with a discussion of the importance of confessions in the reformed tradition and then takes the various topics of theology beginning with the Trinity. On each topic he gives a biblical orientation, followed by a summary of how the doctrine has been understood in the broad Christian tradition and then finally by a discussion of any reformed distinctives. Overall McKim is very helpful in giving an overview of the tradition. At some points he is wholly inadequate, as on the last things, and on others his Barthianism shows. This is especially evident in his discussion of Scripture where he tries to claim Kuyper and Bavinck for his middle way position between classical evangelicalism and liberalism. Also his definition of reformed is very broad indeed and includes anyone remotely connected with the tradition by denomination or whatever. Moreover he leaves out many Reformed writers both inside and outside confessionally reformed or Presbyterian bodies. But having said that McKim offers us a very useful overview of reformed theology today. However I would not put it in the hands of an undiscerning reader. What is needed is a more conservative version of this book that would accessibly, reliably and winsomely introduce people to the reformed tradition.

***Still Sovereign***, edited by **Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware** (Baker 2000) brings together fourteen chapters from the earlier two-volume work *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will*. That work was a response to an attack on Calvinism by Clark Pinnock and others in *Grace Unlimited* and *The Grace of God, the Will of Man*. From that quarter emanates a loathing of reformed theology and a determination to unseat it from its position of influence within evangelicalism. The authors of *Still Sovereign* requite themselves well in battle. Part 1 deals exegetically with a number of key issues: the sovereignty of God in the Old Testament (Raymond Ortlund), election in John and Paul and Romans 9 in particular, the will of God (John Piper), perseverance (Wayne Grudem) and foreknowledge (S.M. Baugh). I found the chapter on the last topic particularly helpful. Section 2 takes up a number of theological issues including effectual calling, prevenient grace (Thomas Schreiner and especially helpful), assurance (D.A. Carson), and God's love (J.I. Packer). The final section has three very

helpful pastoral reflections on divine sovereignty and everyday living (Jerry Bridges), prayer and evangelism (Samuel Storms) and preaching (Edmund Clowney). Everything here is very worthwhile. While it is a defensive response to an attack this book is nevertheless a fresh and timely reminder of the greatness of the reformed faith. Reformed Christians have a glorious treasure to share with all Christians.

Not far beneath the surface of *Still Sovereign* (as the footnotes and occasional references bear witness) is a far more serious attack not only on the reformed faith but on historic Christianity. This emanates from Clark Pinnock and a number of radical Arminians. I am referring to the open theists who in a number of publications are proposing a radical revision of the doctrine of God in which they deny that he has exhaustive foreknowledge of the future. It has to be said that many classical Arminians disagree with them. Obviously the open theists are radically opposed to Calvinism and in many ways Calvinists are the best equipped to deal with what can only be called a heresy. This teaching has stirred up much controversy in North America and it is gaining influence here, especially in some charismatic circles. The reduced God of open theism is much more culturally friendly than the transcendent God of Calvinism. I believe that accounts for much of the appeal of this teaching as does the fact that it makes much of man in shaping the will of God rather than humbly submitting to it. As others have pointed out, we are faced here with a revival of a tenet of Socinianism that will seriously endanger the health of the church. We must take this challenge seriously. Perhaps the best book on the subject is **Bruce Ware's *God's Lesser Glory*** (IVP/Apollos 2000). Very accessibly and fairly Ware explains open theism and then subjects it to a biblical analysis. He doesn't really deal with the philosophical issues involved but stays close to Scripture. He shows how open theism fatally undermines not only God's omniscience, but also his omnipotence and wisdom. In the final section he deals with a number of practical issues: prayer, guidance and suffering. On these three issues the open theists claim that their teaching is a gain for Christians, but Ware shows how just the opposite is the case and how believers are left little confidence or consolation in this world.

Of course controversy is nothing new in the Christian church. The recent publication of a new English translation of a 19th century Welsh classic is a reminder of how intense controversy between Calvinists and Arminians and between Calvinists could be. **John Aaron's translation of Owen Thomas's *The Atonement Controversy in Welsh Theological Literature and Debate, 1707–1841*** (Banner of Truth 2002) makes fascinating reading. The content of this book is in fact only one chapter in Thomas's *Life of John Jones, Talsarn* of 1874. This is a classic in Welsh literature of which Dr Lloyd-Jones had a very high opinion. The book recounts the long controversy over the doctrine of the atonement within Welsh Calvinistic Nonconformity. It begins with the 18th controversies between Calvinists and Arminians, but later focuses on the heated debates among the Calvinistic Methodists and others on the extent of the atonement and the free offer of the gospel. The three main figures are Christmas Evans (the Hyper-Calvinistic position), Thomas Jones (the 'classical' Calvinist position) and John Roberts (the 'moderate' Calvinist position). Jones is Thomas's hero. As the translator and editor make clear in the introduction and footnotes, Thomas is not a wholly reliable guide at some points, both historically and

theologically. Nevertheless he gives a remarkable account of how men on the front-line of evangelism debated these important issues. That is why this book is more than an arid record of a theological controversy. Here were godly men not always in a godly way grappling with gospel issues. Incidentally the Banner has also republished **John Murray's *The Free Offer of the Gospel*** (Banner of Truth 2002). This short pamphlet provides the exegetical basis for offering the gospel freely to everyone.

Finally I will mention a few books that can help lift drooping spirits. **John Piper's *Tested by the Fire*** (IVP 2001) helpfully shows how God's grace triumphed in adversity in the lives of John Bunyan, David Brainerd and William Cowper. As always, Piper writes with the pen of a poet as well as the insight of a pastor, preacher and theologian. Each of these pen-portraits wonderfully reveal the humanity and frailty through which God worked to advance his kingdom. The chapters on Brainerd and Cowper are especially interesting in relation to the problem of depression. **Murray Heron** is not a name known to many of us, but his short autobiography ***Footprint across Quebec*** (Joshua Press 1999) will be a great encouragement to many people working in places where there is either much opposition or little seems to be happening. The book is the story of Heron's experience as a pastor in Quebec when French-speaking Protestants were a tiny and persecuted minority. Of a more devotional nature is **John Piper's *Seeing and Savouring Jesus Christ*** (IVP 2001) in which in 13 short chapters he offers meditations on the person and work of Christ. I recommend using them in your own personal devotions as a way of focusing on Jesus and gazing on his beauty. Finally **Derek Thomas's *Making the Most of Your Devotional Life*** (Evangelical Press 2001) is really a plan for developing a disciplined devotional life. Each chapter is a meditation on one of the psalms of ascent (120-134) to be used over a two-week period. The chapters are fine examples of devotional exposition, firmly rooted in the text but calculated to warm our hearts and transform our lives. As well as using it yourself this would be a good book to recommend to anyone struggling with their 'quiet times'. Perhaps the greatest weakness in our churches is not the adequacy of its preaching or the lack of evangelistic effectiveness but rather the low level of personal spiritual life. While not the only means, books like Piper's and Thomas's will help remedy this weakness.

In the last issue Robin Weekes reviewed *Alpha and Christianity Discovered* courses. Mr Weekes would like the sentence on page 41 that reads 'The doctrine of penal substitution is simply not taught in the course', to be altered to: 'The doctrine of penal substitution is simply not taught clearly in the course'.

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## **Whitefield and George II.**

A Bishop was complaining to King George II of the popularity and success of Mr Whitefield, and entreating his Majesty to use his influence some way or other to silence him. The monarch, no doubt thinking of a class of ministers described by Hugh Latimer as 'unpreaching prelates,' replied ironically, 'I believe the best way to silence him would be to make a Bishop.'

Taken from Rev. JB Wakeley, *Anecdotes of George Whitefield on The Works of George Whitefield* CD-ROM published by Quinta Press.