

Editor's Notes

The relationship of Christians to society and the nature of their political engagement has been a matter of debate from the beginning. In the first centuries the nature of the relationship was perhaps not as problematic since Christians were a relatively small minority in the Roman Empire. But as Christians grew in numbers and influence and after Christianity was officially recognised by the empire the nature of the relationship became an increasingly pressing one. Augustine wrestled with this issue in the *City of God* which in many ways has set the agenda for subsequent debate as his thinking did on so many other issues. The changing context of the church in different cultures and societies has forced Christians to constantly rethink the issue. Today we are facing new challenges in a Europe that on the one hand is increasingly secular and yet that contains a large and vocal Muslim minority that has a very different understanding of the relationship with the state and society. And whereas evangelical Christians in Europe are a relatively small minority they are not in many developing nations or in the United States where they exercise much greater influence and political power. It is important then that as Christians we reflect on our political engagement. The Affinity theological study conference of 2004 sought to look at this matter and the papers delivered at it have been gathered together in *Tales of Two Cities – Christianity and Politics*¹ edited by Stephen Clark. I must admit to a hand in the planning of the conference that brought together a range of biblical, historical and systematic theologians. There is some overlap between contributions and the book doesn't cover everything that a more comprehensive one would have and there are some gaps that Clark seeks to make good in his excellent final chapter. Perhaps the biggest gap is any in-depth treatment of Romans 13 and parallel passages in the letters. Historically it is

Paul's reference to the 'sword' that theologians throughout the history of the church have wrestled with, particularly in the light of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. However there is an excellent survey of the Old Testament by Gordon Wenham and the teaching of Jesus by Steve Wilmshurst. Various approaches to political engagement that have been adopted in history are dealt with by David Field, David Smith, Paul Helm and David McKay. Clark tries to tie the very loose ends together in the final chapter and is especially helpful in exploring the problem that constantly emerges in any discussion on this matter, that is, the relationship between the old and new covenants and its bearing on Christian political activity. If this book won't answer all your questions it will certainly stimulate many.

A very helpful book in this area is the *Jubilee Manifesto*.² This book is the product of thinking going on at the Jubilee Centre in Cambridge that has sought to present what it calls 'Relationism' as an alternative to ideologies such as capitalism and socialism in political discourse. This approach takes seriously the Bible and particularly the Old Testament in shaping Christian political and social thinking. Israel is seen as a paradigm by which the social dimension of the law is commended to the nations. The chapter by Christopher Wright on the 'ethical authority of the biblical social vision' is key to this and a fine summary of what he has written elsewhere. A vast 'agenda' is covered in other chapters. If in some places the feel of the book is not unlike the more secular 'communitarianism' that influenced Tony Blair's attempts at finding a third way, there is much excellent material here that needs to be integrated into Christian political vision and engagement. Here is the stuff that can reorient evangelical political thinking in a much more

biblical way that can have real purchase in the public square of a pluralist society.

Some of the ideological traps that evangelicals need to avoid are surveyed and critiqued in *Political Visions & Illusions*³ by David T. Koyzis of Redeemer College in Ontario. This is a most helpful guide to the ideologies that have shaped the modern world. While the usual suspects of socialism and nationalism are here, so too are liberalism, conservatism and democracy. I would especially commend reading the chapters on the latter since these are the ideologies that those of us in the west are all too familiar with and can assume uncritically. Koyzis offers both a rich and nuanced historical orientation and exposition as well as a critique that at every point is illuminating. His antidote is what he calls 'societal pluralism' rooted in a biblical worldview and articulated historically by among others, Calvin, Althusius and Kuyper and is not dissimilar to the relationism of the previous book. Contra neo-Anabaptists and in line with the Reformed tradition, Koyzis has a positive view of the state as the God-appointed agent for doing justice in his world. It is interesting to note yet again the influence of Abraham Kuyper's thinking. While he by no means got everything right, his basic ideas – antithesis, common grace and sphere sovereignty – are being rediscovered by theologically conservative Protestants who need a strong public theology. Unfortunately Kuyper can mean many things and is selectively appropriated by Christians on the left and right. To do so is to misunderstand the richness of his thought and the historical context of his political activity in the Netherlands. A helpful introduction to Kuyper's thinking is *The Spirit in Public Theology*⁴ in which Vincent Bacote expounds and critiques Kuyper's theology of the Holy Spirit and common grace in relation to his political and

social theology. Bacote argues that Kuyper's own penetrating doctrine of the Spirit helps to remedy some of the weaknesses of his doctrine of common grace. The result is a very suggestive but at points somewhat speculative treatment. The creational dimension of the Spirit's ministry is more easily affirmed than discerned, but nevertheless vital to an evangelical public theology.

One of the great gains in political theology as in other areas of theology has been the development of Reformed biblical theology in the last century. I am currently doing some research on the Puritan doctrine of just war and certainly the Puritans could have done with a better understanding of the progress of redemptive history. In this area the patriarch on whose work so many others have built is Geerhardus Vos. In theological college I had to read his pioneering *Biblical Theology* which if somewhat incomplete nevertheless showed the way for a theology that took the form of divine revelation seriously. Danny E. Olinger has done the church a great service in compiling the *Geerhardus Vos Anthology*.⁵ Buy this book. Not only do you get Vos's insights on a vast array of biblical subjects, but you get a spiritually rich feast that will satisfy your soul. Almost every entry is pure gold, to change the metaphor, that both opens up the theology of the Bible and exalts the glory of the triune God who has so graciously revealed himself. This book can be used as a resource for preaching and study but also for meditation and devotions. Those wanting to know more about Vos as a man will find *The Letters of Geerhardus Vos*⁶ fascinating. It has to be said that like his Princeton colleague, BB Warfield, Vos did not live an outwardly eventful life. He was a serious academic who lectured, wrote and lived quietly with his family. But he had a wide range of correspondents that included Warfield, Kuyper,

Gresham Machen and Herman Bavinck. These letters give both insight into this great man and the events related to the changes in Princeton Seminary. Vos remained at Princeton for reasons that are not clear, but his sympathies were with Machen and the new Westminster Seminary. Also included are some poems he wrote and an informative biography by **James Dennison, Jr.**

Largely because of Vos we enjoy today an ever increasing number of excellent works on biblical theology that has enriched systematic theology and expository preaching. One such book is **Michael D. Williams's** *Far as the Curse is Found*.⁷ The advantage of this book is not that it has some novel approach to the story of redemption, but that it tells the story so well and felicitously. With its pastoral and evangelistic warmth this book is one of the most useful I have come across that I now consult first along with Goldsworthy's *Gospel and Kingdom*. The central motif in the book is God's covenant, a subject taken up more academically in *The God of the Covenant*⁸ edited by **Jamie Grant** and **Alistair Wilson**. Various aspects of covenant theology, both in the Bible and systematics, are discussed. Christopher Wright's chapter, 'Covenant: God's Mission through God's people' I found particularly helpful with its emphasis on the missional nature of the Old Testament, as I did **ATB McGowan's** 'In defense of 'headship' theology'. By 'headship' theology McGowan means federal theology which he restates in a fresh and useful way that is sensitive to a deepening understanding of biblical theology. A testimony to the impact of biblical theology on Reformed systematic theology is *Always Reforming – explorations in systematic theology*⁹ edited by **ATB McGowan**. **Richard Gamble** takes up the theme specifically in the chapter 'The relationship between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology', as also

does **Henri Blocher** in 'Old Covenant, New Covenant' and **Richard Gaffin** in 'Union with Christ: Some Biblical and Theological Reflections'. The latter is a very insightful examination of **John Murray's** teaching and method on the subject. However there are many other good things here such as **Gerald Bray** on the Trinity, **McGowan** on substitutionary atonement and **Cornelis Venema** on justification. There is also a chapter on the idea of theological system by **Kevin Vanhoozer** whose major work is reviewed elsewhere in this issue. On the evidence of this book, far from being fossilised, Reformed theology is very much alive.

It may surprise some to know that **Jonathan Edwards** gave much attention to biblical theology and was in fact something of a pioneer in this. In his chapter in *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*¹⁰ **Harry Stout** sees redemptive history, not only in the Bible but in the outworking of God's purposes in the world, as **Edwards'** great obsession, so much so that he informed the trustees of the College of New Jersey (Princeton) that he intended to write a new theology that would weave together the histories of heaven, earth and hell. His conviction was that 'a body of divinity in an entirely new method, being thrown into the form of a history' was needed. **Stephen Nichols** sees the seven years in Stockbridge as key to **Edwards'** life as it was the period when some of his greatest works were written. Two chapters by **George Marsden** and **Samuel Storms** respectively show how **Edwards'** Reformed theology enabled him to challenge the philosophical assumptions of his age and transcend them so that he can still address those of ours. The latter chapter relates the relevance of **Edwards** to the debate on open theism. The section on **Edwards'** legacy raises some important questions. **DG Hart** critiques **Edwards'** emphasis on experience and its long-term

impact on an evangelicalism that has come to downplay the church and sacraments and **Douglas Sweeney** and **Sean Michael Evans** recount some of the baleful effect of the later New England theology that looked back to Edwards, the latter in terms of RL Dabney's criticisms. **Michael Haykin** has a different focus in *Jonathan Edwards – the Holy Spirit and Revival*¹¹ where he examines the place of the Holy Spirit in Edwards's teaching within its historical context. Because the Holy Spirit is so important for Edwards the result is a superb guide to Edwards not only as a theologian of revival but of the Christian life and mission. In recent years Edwards has often been more used than understood in debates about physical phenomena and revival. Haykin is a sure-footed guide not only to his teaching, but to this remarkable man whose teaching and life has so much relevance today. It is the relevance of Edwards that **Josh Moody** emphasises in his excellent *The God-centred Life*.¹² Moody looks at different aspects of Edwards's life and ministry and applies them to the Christian and church today. If sometimes his applications are a bit strained, the effort is well worth it to help people appreciate what Edwards has to say. There are many good things here on revival, spiritual experience, discernment, secondary issues, family life and ministry. Edwards is not spared criticism in the chapter 'Human leaders failed' where his tolerance of slavery, perhaps less than proactive pastoral care and doctrinal weaknesses (yes Edwards had them as do all of us) are highlighted. However the chapter that I want to commend is 'The cause of modernism's plight is its human-centredness'. Read this to see how Edwards' God-centred theology can both give sanity to our Christian lives and help us to address the plight of our generation as Edwards did his.

Perhaps no one today does more to propagate the

heart of Edwards' theology and to some extent exemplifies aspects of his ministry than **John Piper**. In *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* mentioned above, DG Hart asks where in evangelicalism Edwards would fit today and rather cheekily suggests the pastorate of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis. There are many aspects of Piper's ministry that differ from Edwards, but he shares Edwards' radical God-centredness in thinking about reality. The God-centredness of the gospel is the theme of *God is the Gospel – meditations on God's love as the gift of himself*.¹³ Piper tends to hammer home the same great themes in his books, but with variations. Here he simply explores how the gospel is not primarily about the benefits that we have, but the God we come to know in the revelation of his glory in Jesus Christ. The book is built around an exposition of 2 Corinthians 4:4-6. Two other books in this connection need to be mentioned. Hendrickson Publishers have produced an edition of Edwards *Sermons*¹⁴ that contains all the well-known ones as well as *Day by Day with Jonathan Edwards*¹⁵ which as such books do gives us short readings from across Edwards' works for every day of the year. I suspect that Edwards would have been bemused at the thought of his works being used in this way, but also approving if it would help Christians to be God-centred not only in their daily devotions but in their lives.

Before I conclude I want to mention a book that is neither theological nor even Christian. I commend *Our Culture, What's Left of It - the mandarins and the masses*¹⁶ by **Theodore Dalrymple**. Anyone who knows Dalrymple's writing (often in the Daily or Sunday Telegraph in the United Kingdom) will know him as a very perceptive and pessimistic observer of life in this country. He has been until

References

recently an inner city general practitioner and prison doctor. A common theme is life at the bottom of society where he sees the baleful effects of the social and cultural revolution so gleefully advocated by the social and intellectual elites. His writing has been compared to that of George Orwell. The book is a collection of articles largely taken from that excellent periodical *City Journal* that so wonderfully extols the modern city and yet shows how well-meaning but deluded politicians, usually on the left, and others let it down, not least in education. The subject matter ranges from Virginia Woolf to Versace and modern art, from the art of Gilray to the kitsch of the Diana industry and much more, but always with an eye to the impact on ordinary people. Dalrymple is a self-confessed atheist, but his take on life has a resonance with an Augustinian understanding of fallen human nature. Reading a book like this that is so full of human sensitivity makes one realise that the only remedy for man's plight is the God-centred gospel of the Bible.

1. Stephen Clark, *Tales of Two Cities - Christianity and Politics* (Leicester: IVP 2005), ISBN-10:84474-096-X.
2. Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft, *Jubilee Manifesto – a framework, agenda and strategy for social reform* (Leicester: IVP 2005) ISBN-13: 978-1-84474-074-9.
3. David T. Koyzis, *Political Visions & Illusions* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press: 2003), ISBN 0-8308-2726-9.
4. Vincent E. Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology - Appropriating the legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2005), ISBN 0-8010-2740-3.
5. Danny E. Olinger, ed., *A Geerhardus Vos Anthology* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed 2005), ISBN 0-87552-618-7.
6. James T. Dennison, Jr., *The Letters of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed 2005), ISBN-10: 0-87552-187-8.
7. Michael D. Williams, *Far as the Curse is Found – the covenant story of redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed 2005), ISBN-13: 978-0-87552-510-5.
8. Jamie A. Grant and Alistair I. Wilson, *The God of the Covenant-biblical, theological and contemporary perspectives* (Leicester: IVP 2005), ISBN 1-84474-061-X.
9. ATB McGowan, ed., *Always Reforming – explorations in systematic theology* (Leicester: IVP 2006) ISBN-13: 978-1-84474-130-4.
10. DG Hart, Sean Michael Lewis and Stephen J Nichols, eds., *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2003), ISBN 0-8010-2622-9.
11. Michael AG Haykin, *Jonathan Edwards – the Holy Spirit in Revival* (Darlington: Evangelical Press 2005), ISBN-13 978-085234-599-3.
12. Josh Moody, *The God-centred Life – insights from Jonathan Edwards for today* (Leicester: IVP 2006), ISBN-13: 978-1-84474-131-1.
13. John Piper, *God is the Gospel* (Leicester: IVP 2005), ISBN-10: 1-84474-109-5.
14. Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons of Jonathan Edwards* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson 2005), ISBN 1-56563-770-4.
15. Randall J Pederson, ed., *Day by Day with Jonathan Edwards* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson 2005), ISBN 1-56563-388-1.
16. Theodore Dalrymple, *Our culture or what's left of it* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee 2005), ISBN 1-56663-643-4.