

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Evangelicals in the Public Square*, by J. Budziszewski. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006. 224pp. pb. \$19.99. ISBN 0-8010-3156-7.

**Reviewed by Timothy Sherratt.**

J. Budziszewski finds evangelical political reflection wanting and the hour late. In this appealing volume, he considers four influential evangelical thinkers, Carl F. H. Henry, Abraham Kuyper, Francis Schaeffer, and John Howard Yoder, and regrets their indifference to general revelation in the articulation of their respective views of politics. These thinkers rely on scriptural principles, but such principles have their limits: good and evil do not map simply onto reward and punishment, civil disobedience to laws may not extend to entire regimes, and it is not clear from Scripture how far governments may venture beyond their juridical function or how leaders ought to be selected.

Relying on Scripture alone, moreover, evangelical thinkers tend to inflate the biblical record. Thus the divine law for ancient Israel becomes a legal code for all humankind, covenant a basis for all political authority, and the policies of Israel's leaders a blueprint for public policy generally.

General revelation supplies such principles as identity, noncontradiction, the link between cause and effect, the basics of natural teleology, and God's basic moral requirements. As Budziszewski puts it, the Bible "assumes that these large truths are known before we come to the Bible."

Budziszewski presents his four shapers of evangelical thought through a representative major work from each. This approach gets him into some difficulties with his respondents, David L. Weeks, John Bolt, William Edgar, and Ashley Woodiwiss respectively, who ask for a broader reading in every case. Nevertheless, the strategy is successful for the book models the conversation Budziszewski calls evangelicals to engage in.

Confronting 1930s fundamentalism Carl F.H. Henry called for redemptive responses to everything modern. Small wonder Henry's ambition should have led to defeatism, but Budziszewski links defeatism to premillennialism, "which remains the eschatology of the evangelical majority." For Budziszewski, Henry undermines his commitment to general revelation through ambivalence about humans' capacity to grasp natural law. This criticism is the pattern for the argument as a whole, but in Henry's case it led to his offering not so much an approach to social activism, as a substitute for it. "Can [Henry's call for a Christian program of social reform] really mean anything but 'evangelize'?" (54). David Weeks offers a qualified agreement, but questions whether their reliance on Scripture makes it both "undesirable and unrealistic to expect evangelicals to craft a distinctive view of politics."

Budziszewski treats Abraham Kuyper's concept of Sphere Sovereignty as making, despite unresolved internal contradictions, what could have been a signal contribution to evangelical political thought, had not Kuyper also undermined the

natural law elements in the concept. Kuyper held that God's sovereignty descends on all social institutions—state, church, family, businesses, science, and art—and Budziszewski views him as developing “a theologically motivated theory of natural law.” But Kuyper manifested ambivalence towards the state, distinguishing between the “social spheres” that are natural, from the state, which he termed “artificial” or “mechanical.” This ambivalence stems from Kuyper's view of the human being who is both naturally political in the Aristotelian sense, and also a sinner, alienated from the polis. Thus Kuyper denies himself full access to natural law, which his theology of human authority requires. Close, but no cigar for the Dutchman.

John Bolt explains that sphere sovereignty served as an orientation to politics, not a fully-fledged theory, but he might have given more emphasis to the care with which Kuyper's thought is situated at the juncture of creation norms and human fallenness—the better to appropriate both special *and* general revelation?

William Edgar questions the choice of *A Christian Manifesto* for the way it privileges the later, fundamentalist Francis Schaeffer at the expense of the Schaeffer of *The God Who is There* and L'Abri and the way the Schaeffers helped thousands set off on fruitful journeys of faith. Budziszewski applauds Schaeffer for mapping how secular humanism had come to dominate “law, politics, and education,” but puzzles over Schaeffer's limited recommendations for redress. As a “presuppositionalist” moreover, Schaeffer was bound to emphasize distinctively Christian responses to social, moral and political questions—while an emphasis on general revelation would have done much of this work for him.

Budziszewski finds John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* a perplexing, even contradictory, work, while praising Yoder's commitment to taking Jesus seriously. But Yoder's positing of the church as alternative, indeed, the only real, polis poses a contradiction so stark that Yoder cannot escape its consequences. Without enforcement of civil law or doctrine, there can be neither a real state nor a real church. Even if the credit for victory goes to YHWH, Budziszewski observes, “at times YHWH requires that Israel use the sword” (103). Natural law could not have extricated Yoder from contradiction because he claims, “we have no access to the good creation of God” (104). Without natural law's assistance, for example, Yoder cannot distinguish marriage and family, which belong to the order of creation, from slavery, which does not, and for which “there is no specific creational ordinance to follow” (115).

Ashley Woodiwiss does not rescue Yoder either, but credits him, quoting Thomas Heilke, with a fruitful approach, one of “situat[ing] the voice of the church as a ‘supportive resident alien,’ one that is neither ‘a manipulator of social forces nor an apologist for political necessity’ ”(192).

Thus we reach Budziszewski's provisional conclusion that “[A]ll four thinkers are ambivalent about the enduring structures of creation and about the reality of general revelation” (120).

Budziszewski writes with a winsome fluency, taking his evangelical shapers seriously, and disclosing their thought, warts and all, with understanding and sympathy. What is missing from his critique is an amplified account of the uses of general revelation he has in mind. Consider, for example, Budziszewski's plea that...

*The only hope for persuading confused fellow citizens to embrace a Christian position on an issue such as, say, the definition of marriage is to get out of the straitjacket of 'rights talk' and connect with matters of general revelation that they know already—such as the need of children for a permanent mother and father. (87)*

Perhaps fellow citizens should know these things already, but the confidence with which the assertion is made goes undefended, a curious omission given the 20th century's treatment of natural law.

Jean Bethke Elshtain joins Budziszewski in warning that evangelicals will not remain “where we are now” if “we fail to mend our carelessness.” But what *is* the best way to think about politics? Noting that Biblical truths are compatible with many kinds of regime, Elshtain plumps for a faithful articulation of the human person, the site of so much distortion in modern and contemporary Western thought. It really matters what view of the human being lies at the center of one's comprehensive theory of politics. But on the other hand, Elshtain sheds doubt on comprehensive theories of politics in a world where perfect knowledge and clear biblical guidelines are not available. Prudential judgments about contingencies may be the best we can do.

With this volume, Budziszewski has re-opened a refreshing line of thinking in Christian conversation about politics.

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*“Doing God” A Future for Faith in the Public Square*, by Nick Spencer.

London: Theos, 2006. 74pp. pb. £10.00. ISBN 0-9554453-0-2.

Available for download at [www.theosthinktank.co.uk](http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk).

**Reviewed by Daniel Strange.**

Whether motivated by internal theological (re-)discovery and/or advantageous external social conditions, there is evidence (the launch of this journal being one example!) to suggest that we are currently witnessing a slow but perceptible ‘thawing’ of the evangelical mind which seeks to apply a biblical worldview and the Lordship of Jesus Christ to every area of life, including the societal and political spheres. In November 2005, and surrounded by some media interest,

*Theos*, a new public theology think tank, was launched. Directed by Paul Woolley and funded by a wide range of clients together with a substantial grant from the Bible Society, *Theos* aims, through commentary, research and events...

*To provide alternative perspectives to the orthodoxies of secular culture and impact public opinion about the role of faith and belief in society...our perspective is that faith is not just important for human flourishing and the renewal of society, but that society can only flourish if faith is given the space to do so.*<sup>1</sup>

In terms of theological subscription *Theos* claims to subscribe to the historic creeds and formularies of Christianity, though eschewing the ‘emotive’ and ‘misunderstood’ labels of ‘evangelical’ or ‘liberal’: “We are neither Catholic or Protestant. We include people across different denominations and traditions.”

The inaugural piece of research undertaken by *Theos* is their report “*Doing God*”: *A Future for Faith in the Public Square*, authored by Nick Spencer who has previously written both for LICC and the Jubilee Centre. Spencer himself helpfully comments that the aim of the report is...

*A rubble-clearing exercise, an attempt to clear away some objections to letting God into the public square and to create a space for public theology by arguing why religious engagement in public debates should, and, in all probability, will increase in twenty-first century Britain. (67)*

The primary audience for the report appears to be those outside the Christian community. It is an apology for public theology which is largely descriptive, giving an accurate summary of the state of play when it comes to the role of faith in the public square, where we are, where we have come from, and where we are going, “whether we like it or not, and this report acknowledges the fact that some do not, we will be ‘doing God’ in the future” (18). Spencer acknowledges that although the report is written from a Christian perspective “it attempts to practice what it preaches by relying on public reason, using constructive rather than destructive arguments and adopting a tone of respect” (19).

Using many well-known recent examples in the British context and omitting technical jargon, the introduction briefly covers the debates within the sociology of religion concerning secularization and sacralization. To the question, where does this leave the role of faith in the public square, Spencer comments: “The answer is that most characteristically English of things: a fudge wrapped in a muddle inside an uncertainty” (17). Noting certain high profile irrational theophobic attacks on faith in public life, chapter one tackles more intelligent arguments against religious involvement in the public square, those of

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the website [www.theosthinktank.co.uk](http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk).

inflexibility, inhumanity, sectarianism, inaccessibility. Countering these objections, Spencer presents a religiously motivated position in public life which must be serious about debate, negotiation and compromise, which focuses outwardly and inclusively towards the common good and which can both accommodate its language to the norms of public discourse while at the same time question the terms of public discourse. Chapter two is more theological, devoted exclusively to a final objection concerning religion in public life: that God and Caesar do not and should not mix. Relying heavily on the work of N.T. Wright and Oliver O'Donovan, and focusing on the meaning of the 'Kingdom of God', Spencer argues that 'Christianity must be public in order to be itself. Although some maintain that religious people of all stripes should be allowed to practise their religion as long as it has no public presence, most recognise Christianity's essentially public nature' (2) Spencer also makes the important point that historically the 'secular' state was, and is a *Christian* vision of 'dual citizenship' which guards against absolutism, either in theocratic or state totalitarian forms. For Spencer this is to turn defence into attack, "that the secular public square, properly understood, is a Christian legacy and one that requires an ongoing Christian presence to remain true to itself" (38).

The next three chapters give more positive reasons why God is here to stay in the centre of the public square. Chapter three focuses on the relationship between the state and civil society noting the increasingly crucial role of faith-based civic activity in the UK. Chapter four notes the recent 'decoupling of wealth and happiness'(51) and the stress on well-being and human flourishing which traditionally is religious ground, "the public square is coming back to God, rather than the other way around" (57). Chapter five concerns itself with the politics of identity arguing against secular humanism, the impossibility of suppressing religiously motivated political engagement. Indeed Spencer argues that the attempt to suppress religion from public life will not dampen but only fuel extremism.

Spencer begins his final chapter on a more polemical note, outlining the ever-widening cracks of liberal humanism "which has for so long provided the intellectual foundations for the public square" (67). How then are we to 'do God'? Spencer sketches four avenues of engagement. First, there needs to be some constructive choreography between government, local authorities and religiously-motivated voluntary groups. Second, there needs to be a more internal discussion with the Christian community concerning political theology. Third (and repeated again), is the need for Christians (and others) to accommodate their language and reasoning to the bar of public reason while at the same challenging the norm and 'asking all parties, irrespective of their public identities, to justify their faith-based positions.'(71). Therefore and fourth, if we are showing our workings, we should 'not react with bewilderment when a public figure does 'do God'' (71).

Overall, the arrival of *Theos* in general and Spencer's report in particular is a welcome one and I will watch with interest how the organisation develops. The case against autonomous liberal humanism must be constantly articulated as must the rejection of the 'sacred/secular' divide which serves as a critique of both political liberalism and pietistic evangelicalism. Although Spencer's analysis is not particularly original in its findings, the report is clear, concise and irenic in tone. As a descriptive piece of work it will serve as a helpful introduction into the area of public theology, and for those who are suspicious of religious involvement in public life, will cause them to question some of their fears and presuppositions.

However, while surmising that the intended audience of the report are those outside the church, apart from the chapter on God and Caesar, as an evangelical theologian I was left asking some important theological questions. As I have already mentioned, Spencer attempts to practice what he preaches in speaking in the language of public reason while questioning the foundations of such reason. However we do not see the theological workings which would legitimise using 'public reason' rather than engage in an illegitimate syncretistic compromise. Is it to be based on natural law in either its Catholic or Protestant versions? Is it based on God's common grace and borrowed Christian capital? Both the organisation (more so) and the report (less so) appear to have taken a decision to speak very 'thinly' regarding their particular Christian/evangelical(?) convictions with the aim of getting a hearing, rather than speaking 'thickly' in tradition-specific language. My question is to discern whether this is a tactical and strategic move for the sake of communication (and that there is a robust theological blueprint that they are working from underneath), or whether the 'thinness' of language is actually a 'thinness' of theological conception. Whether it is one or the other, I myself remain unconvinced by such 'thinness' and Spencer's take on 'theological accommodation', despite agreeing with Spencer on the need for high-level and sophisticated engagement, dialogue and communication. As Christians we cannot put aside our presuppositions regarding biblical authority and the Lordship of Christ and we must not hide such presuppositions. I largely agree with Spencer's critique of secular humanistic liberalism and the myth of religious neutrality. I also note that he notes throughout the report that we should be questioning the rules of the public reason game. However I still think Spencer is too tentative, dare I say too irenic, and concedes too much to the enemy. 'Rubble-clearing' needs heavy equipment and is by its nature a destructive work. Transforming our culture for Christ requires a clear set of biblical and theological blueprints for faithful construction. In seeing all non-Christian ideologies in terms of autonomous and futile idolatries which must be shown up for what they are and then destroyed, our engagement in public life must reflect such a biblical mandate. In putting forward the Christian alternative we must speak in Christian language. And we can only destroy idols and transform society on the foundation of the offensively particular gospel message of Christ because transformation will only happen through conversion, and speaking 'thickly' will necessarily bring

constant opportunities to talk about the gospel as we apply gospel truth to every area of life. Without that all we will have is our very own evangelical fudge wrapped in a muddle inside an uncertainty.

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*Why Politics Needs Religion: The Place of Religious Arguments in the Public Square*, by Brendan Sweetman. Downers Grove, ILL: IVP Academic, 2006. 256pp. pb. \$19.00. ISBN 0-8308-2842-7.

**Reviewed by Brian Edgar.**

It has long been argued that most secularist attempts to remove or restrict religious dialogue from the public arena are based on a misunderstanding of the true nature of a 'secular' society. But in *Why Politics Needs Religion* Brendan Sweetman, Professor of Philosophy at Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Missouri, argues that these anti-religious sentiments are not so much a misunderstanding of the concept of secularism as an essential dimension of it.

He believes that the concept of 'secularism' as a strategy for pluralist societies is now so compromised that it is no longer able to represent the view that the public arena accepts both religious and non-religious viewpoints while refusing to preference one above another. For Sweetman 'secularism' refers to 'the religion of secularism' which is the naturalistic, atheistic, humanism of an otherwise diverse group of thinkers united simply in their conviction that religious belief has no place in the public square.

But secularism's anti-religious sentiment and its political implications are structurally equivalent to Christianity's metaphysical beliefs and religious practices, and so both Christianity and secularism qualify as worldviews with conceptual frameworks of ideas composed of an 'outer edge' (justification and structure) and a 'center' (practices and content). In this way Sweetman sets out to establish the ground rules for a debate between worldviews in order to engage and defeat this virulent form of secularism.

In the process of demonstrating the structural equivalence of the two approaches, Sweetman makes rationalist (and potentially problematic) definitions of 'faith' and 'belief'. Faith is defined in terms of the level of rational, evidential, objective certainty required to accept something as true. Faith means 'holding a belief for which the evidence is less than one hundred percent certain or decisive' (39). Such a definition allows the holding of all sorts of beliefs (virtually anything at all, I would suggest) to be defined as having 'faith', the only criterion being a degree of uncertainty. Worldview are thus 'faiths' because they hold to beliefs which are not provable. The advantages of this are firstly, that with some prodding, secularism is forced to examine its own uncertainties, and secondly,

that Christianity and secularism are able to engage each other as competing worldviews on the same rational, territory.

Sweetman's aim is very positive. He wants Christianity to rationally engage secularism while avoiding subjectivist and relativist tendencies, and he is convinced of the intellectual and rational superiority of Christianity. Consequently, he is certain that if disputes between these two worldviews are settled by appeal to objective reason and empirical evidence the Christian faith will win.

The issue of the persuasiveness of theological arguments in public debate is certainly a relevant issue, but an Enlightenment-like confidence in the objectivity of reason is assumed and questions of the possibility of different traditions of rationality are not addressed. Moreover, the implications for a biblical understanding of faith as trust in God, when faith is required to appeal for verification to an external court of rational appeal, are not explored.

This rationalist definition of faith also has implications for the way that 'belief' is categorised in terms of 'lower-order' and 'higher-order' beliefs. This distinction, it is argued, is helpful when adjudicating between competing worldviews in the public square. These different levels of belief are distinguished by the amount of faith required to subscribe to them. A lower order of belief 'usually requires faith' (raising the question of belief without faith?) but is 'based mostly on reason and evidence' and so is appropriate for use in public debate as it is more likely to be regarded as reasonable by others. A higher order belief requires more faith as it is rationally less certain, and thus should not be used in public debate.

There have previously been other categorisations of theological belief, such as the distinction between 'dogma', 'doctrine' and 'opinion'. For example, the doctrines of creation, salvation, and resurrection are generally considered more central than whether communion bread should be leavened. But such distinctions have usually focused on the relative centrality of the doctrine to the overall scheme of theological thinking. Sweetman's distinction between higher and lower hinges upon the rationality of the belief according to an external, rational standard. Thus Sweetman says of some higher-order beliefs, "it might take a great deal of faith to subscribe to a particular belief, and because the degree of faith required is very high, this may weaken one's commitment to the belief" (53) Some will reckon that treating faith and reason like water and air in a glass (the more water, the less air) is unsatisfactory. Sweetman is implicitly raising, in a very serious manner the same question addressed by Charles Dodgson when Alice claims, "One can't believe impossible things!" and the Queen responds, "I daresay you haven't had much practice. When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

After the first three initial chapters which deal with worldviews, secularism and religious beliefs, Sweetman addresses the arguments that are used to keep



religion out of politics. His close, analytical style demonstrates the inadequacy and the undemocratic nature of successive arguments. He argues that...

*Any type of suppression of a view before a public debate is held violates the basic principles of democracy, especially of freedom and equality. It is a violation of democratic principles if A decides in advance that B's view is irrational, and so B's view should not be part of any public discussion.... this is why it is wise for any worldview to allow a significant realm of free speech in a democratic society, a realm where minority, controversial, even objectionable views can be introduced publicly. (109)*

He relates these arguments to John Rawls' political liberalism and then discusses the way in which religious arguments can be introduced into the public arena before applying the argument to serve several controversial issues including school prayer, euthanasia and other moral issues.

Exactly what religious arguments can be raised in the public arena? This is a critical question and Sweetman returns to it towards the end of the book. Generally, says Sweetman, an argument in the public arena is considered religious if it is derived from a text such as the Bible, the teaching of an institution such as the church, a profound personal experience, a religious tradition or a direct appeal to faith alone. Sweetman agrees with the secularists who say these ought to be *kept out* of the public arena, although he places two conditions on this. The first is that they can be introduced providing one is prepared to debate the rationality of the source rather than simply appeal to them as authoritative (although he also says, "it is crucial to recognise that is not necessary for me to convince the secularist that religious belief is rational in order for religious beliefs to have a role in politics; all that is necessary, is that *I* hold that they are rational" (107). Secondly, he excludes religious arguments on the condition that secularists exclude their own beliefs which come from the same type of sources.

Sweetman then also adds a further qualification for Christians. He proposes that specifically religious arguments ought not to be introduced into public debate unless they are defended by rational arguments which have the potential to make them persuasive to non-Christians. He argues that one cannot reasonably expect people from different traditions and cultures to be persuaded by arguments based on Christian sources. This means, as noted previously, that one can only introduce lower order beliefs into public debate, that is, those that are justified by appeal to rational argument. Apart from the problem of identifying which beliefs are higher and lower (if there is a dispute he believes that discussion should be a part of the public debate) it means omitting those things which are at the heart of the Christian faith. For instance, an argument which is based on the resurrection of Jesus is inadmissible. His point about the difficulty of persuading people with such arguments and the benefits of some form of common, rational argument is well made. The difficulty is that many a Christian rational argument (whether concerning action on climate change or capital punishment) is inextricably

intertwined to a high-order belief (concerning, for example creation or redemption).

The queries noted here should not detract from the fact that Professor Sweetman has undertaken a thorough and detailed treatment of the arguments involved in considering the relationship of faith to politics, especially as it occurs in the North American scene. In so doing he has made a significant contribution to public theology.

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*Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, by John Swinton and Harriet Mowat. London: SCM Press, 2006. 280pp. pb. £16.99. 0-334-02980-5. **Reviewed by David Smith.**

The authors of this book describe their purpose in writing it as ‘to enable Practical Theologians to generate knowledge which is faithful and transformative’. The work is divided into two clearly distinguished sections, one providing theoretical foundations for Practical Theology, and the other offering four ‘case studies’ of research projects which very helpfully illustrate the distinctive nature, and considerable variety, of applied research practiced within this discipline.

In the past the term ‘Practical Theology’ has been understood as relating to little more than the practice of Christian ministry in an almost technical sense: how to conduct the liturgy, how to prepare and deliver sermons, how to baptize, marry and bury people, etc. So conceived the subject had little to commend it and, rather unsurprisingly, remained completely marginal to mainstream theological studies. What is presented here is a quite different concept, one which actually offers traditional theological studies a series of important challenges and charts a method of reflection and research that (to misquote Marx) insists that the theologian’s calling is not simply to describe the world *but to change it*.

It is worth quoting the authors’ definition of Practical Theology: ‘...critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God’s redemptive practices in, to and for the world’. In Part One of the volume the authors unpack this statement carefully and clearly, and in the process offer enlightening comments on the relationship between their discipline and, on the one hand, biblical and theological studies, and, on the other, the social sciences. At the heart of the book is a particularly good description of qualitative research in both theory and practice. This section is enhanced by a series of diagrams which will prove to be immensely helpful both to students beginning research projects and to teachers responsible for supervising them.

Section 2 is entitled 'The Practice of Research' and offers four contrasting examples of projects supervised by the authors; these case studies focus on 'Depression and Spirituality', 'Exploring an "Emergent Church"', researching the ministry of chaplains, and examining the relationship between 'Religious Communities and Suicide'. The essentially practical nature of each of these projects is evident, but so too is the range and variety of topics and the correspondingly diverse methodologies involved in undertaking such work. The second section of the book brilliantly illustrates the principles described in part one and (for this reader at least) establishes the crucial importance of this discipline for the well being of the churches – an importance that appears likely to grow rather rapidly in a post-Christian culture.

I have only one real complaint: I searched the index in vain for a mention of 'mission' or 'missiology'. Actually the term is to be found in the text: we are informed that Practical Theology is 'a fundamentally missiological discipline' (27) and that it exists to enable the Church to 'perform faithfully' as it shares 'God's ongoing mission in, to and for the world' (25). That is fine, but it would have been helpful if the nature of the relationship between Practical Theology and Mission Studies could have been discussed in the same way that the authors address the connections with Systematic Theology and the social sciences. Does Practical Theology complement missiology? Or does it in fact aspire to subsume it? It is well known that the study of Christian mission has long had difficulty in gaining access to the theological curriculum; if Practical Theology and Mission Studies overlap to a considerable degree one might ask whether either have much prospect in the future if they engage in a struggle to occupy the same rather narrow space available within the academy.

None of which is to detract from the importance of this book. It argues for the necessity of Practical Theology with passion and clarity and, as is entirely appropriate given the subject, demonstrates through the narration of valuable case studies, precisely how qualitative research methods produce results in specific pastoral and social contexts. I commend this book most warmly and will be consulting it often in the future.

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*Evil and the Justice of God*, by N.T. Wright. Downers Grove, ILL: IVP, 2006. 176pp. hb. \$18.00. 978 0-8308-3398-6.

**Reviewed by Stephen Vantassel.**

Before writing a book on the meaning of the crucifixion, Wright thought he should first engage the thorny issue of evil. His approach to the topic is atypical. He deliberately avoids rehashing the traditional philosophical arguments on evil

and its ultimate origin, and instead decides to focus on the pragmatic problem of evil that he calls, “The New Problem of Evil.” The New Problem of Evil, according to Wright, contains three disparate elements: our agnosticism regarding evil, our shock when evil “...hits us in the face (25)”, and our inappropriate response to evil. Wright explains that our inadequate understanding of evil accounts for the lack of the categories needed to deal with it. He blamed our moral ineptitude on the influence of postmodernism. Postmodernism’s deconstruction of truth, through its claim that every judgment is imperfect, goes beyond questioning the objectivity of truth, it questions the idea of personal identity. If there is no “I” that can be differentiated from the object, then how can we ever blame anyone for anything? Wright explained that the loss of a moral center causes us to fall victim to misguided ways of confronting evil, such as projecting blame on society or blaming ourselves. Wright says we must get past these simplistic extremes and recognize that there is no easy solution to evil. However, he carefully reminds the reader that all is not lost. God is still more powerful than that four letter word, evil.

Wright spends the next two chapters surveying the Bible’s treatment of evil. He correctly explains that the Scripture fails to provide easy answers about evil, noting instead, that scripture assures us that God will repair the evil-damaged creation not by abandoning creation (i.e. taking us all to heaven) but by renewing creation. Without discounting other theories of the atonement, Wright employs *Christus Victor* theology to explain how Christ’s atoning work was a victory over evil (95). He says the cross was the location in space and time that Christ dealt with evil in all its moral, political, religious and spiritual reality (92). Christ’s resurrection demonstrated that we have forgiveness of sin because death (the consequence of sin) has been conquered. The resurrection is proof of renewal—it shows that evil, as an anti-creation force, has been defeated and therefore powerless. Christ’s actions exemplify how we are to love one another. The cross shows the church that it needs to be forgiven and needs to accept Christ’s mantle of suffering love. He also suggests that God’s forgiveness of the world frees God from having to be angry at it (136-7, 141).

Wright correctly reminds Christians that because of Christ’s work, we are empowered also to forgive—to be priests representing God’s work. For too long the church simply saw her work as other worldly rather than seeking to transmit and reflect God’s love in the present. Wright goes to great lengths to explain that forgiveness is critical for a proper redress of the evil that exists around us. He contends that contrary to Judaism and Islam, forgiveness does not deny or minimize evil, it actually recognizes its seriousness. Forgiveness requires us to see evil acts as wrong. The difference is that we do not allow evil to dominate or rule over us. Forgiveness allows us to take the power of the next age and apply it to the present; to do the work of restoration, which God will ultimately complete later. Wright sees three areas where forgiveness can have a key impact, namely, racial and interpersonal tensions, Third World debt, and criminal justice.

Wright's analysis on the role of forgiveness for racial and interpersonal relations has much to commend it (158ff). His explanation of the meaning and significance of forgiveness is essential reading. Pastors will find Wright's critique of the self-serving popular psychology that says we should forgive in order to help ourselves very helpful. He even delves into the issue of the need to forgive ourselves, arguing self-forgiveness is included in the Lord's Prayer statement, "deliver us from evil." Wright believes we must forgive ourselves not by diminishing evil, such as saying the error was no big deal, but by learning to accept the fact that if God forgives, so should we. Why Wright did not address the problem of self-forgiveness as an example of our sinful pride is unknown.

Unfortunately, Wright's comments on forgiveness of third-world debt and criminal justice neglected to address the hermeneutical problem of how Christians should apply the principles of Christian ecclesiastical fellowship to secular society that neither shares our views or values. Christians must be salt and light to secular society but Wright should have been more explicit about the dangers of merging state and religion. Nor does he provide a strategy for how Christians should work to implement these ideas. On the issue of forgiving third-world debt, should Christians lobby the government, run for office, protest or simply pay the bill through Christian charities? Regarding criminal law, Wright overlooks the fact that in the case of murder, reconciliation is hindered by the death of the victim. Certainly reconciliation is a desirable goal between the murderer and the victim's survivors. But whether that reconciliation should cause us to avoid pressing for the death penalty is less than clear. At this point, this reviewer thinks that Wright's application of forgiveness to debt and criminal law is informed more by liberal theories rather than Biblical exegesis.

Nevertheless, Wright should be commended for refocusing us on what we ought to do with evil, rather than discussing how it came to be. He is onto something where he suggests the philosophical questions are really smoke screens for the real issue, "What should I do now?" This short book raises important questions for Christians interested in a practical response to evil. If his attention to sacramentalism and avoidance of the scourge of abortion can be overlooked, his book can be profitable to pastors and theologians interested in reflecting on Biblically responsible ways to minister to an evil stricken and suffering world.

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