

Book Reviews

GNOSTIC TRUTH AND CHRISTIAN HERESY. A STUDY IN THE HISTORY OF GNOSTICISM **Alastair H B Logan**

Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1996 373pp £27.50 hb ISBN 0-567-09733-1

The rather arresting title of this book is clearly designed to draw attention to what might otherwise appear to be a highly technical study of a particular strand of Gnosticism. In fact, the book bears little or no relation to the sort of study associated with the name of the late Walter Bauer, according to whom 'orthodoxy' was essentially a late second-century concoction, and the various 'heresies' represented survivals of a primitive Christian pluralism.

Dr Logan starts from the highly orthodox view that Gnosticism was mainly, if not exclusively, an offshoot of Christianity, which provided the impetus for it. He identifies the first Gnostics as Platonists who composed and then interpreted their myths accordingly. None of this will surprise anyone who has experience of Christian evangelism in alien cultures today, where one of the side-effects of preaching the gospel is that syncretistic movements emerge, trying to combine the new religion with the old. The Moonies of Korea, for example, are a modern equivalent, even if they are not direct descendants, of the Gnostics and exhibit many of the same fundamental characteristics.

Dr Logan believes that there was a strand of Gnosticism, represented in the Nag Hammadi codices, which coalesced around the Seth-myth, and that this was essentially a reaction, or a response, to the preaching of the Christian gospel. From there he recreates an entire theological system, including the fall of *Sophia* (Wisdom) and an eternal, heavenly Redeemer. He accepts suggestions proposed by others that, for example, post-baptismal chrismation originated with this group, though obviously such things are virtually impossible to prove.

On the whole, Dr Logan is a careful scholar who does not stray too far beyond the evidence. A good example of this can be seen in his excursus dealing with the origin of the name Barbelo (p 98). After listing all the proffered solutions to this problem, and affirming that the name must have meant something to the Gnostics, he concludes by suggesting that it was invented out of nowhere, but had so many plausible resonances with the 'sources' various scholars have suggested that it caught on and began to be suggestive of some (at least) of those links. This may well be right – the Gnostics were nothing if not imaginative – and at least it avoids having to pronounce on any one of the other choices, not one of which can make exclusive claims for itself.

Dr Logan has a high opinion of Irenaeus and accepts his account of the Gnostics as authentic, even though the Sethians had moved some way from the groups which he was describing. A very helpful diagram on p 55 puts this in context for potentially bewildered readers, and helps us chart our way through what is, by any reckoning, difficult terrain.

Gnosticism is a controversial subject and seems likely to become even more so, now that so many modern radicals and 'new agers' have latched onto it as some kind of justification for cooking up their own form of syncretism. But Dr Logan's book, though it may well not be the last word on its subject, makes a solid and serious contribution to the ongoing debate. He is to be congratulated for this, and readers who persevere with this highly complex, and often uncongenial subject will be rewarded at the end for having done so.

GERALD BRAY

JEWES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN DIASPORA FROM ALEXANDER TO TRAJAN John M G Barclay
 Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1996 522pp £34.95 hb ISBN 0-567-08500-7

Until this book appeared there was no comprehensive study of Jews in the Diaspora during the crucial centuries from Alexander the Great to the end of the New Testament era. Dr Barclay has therefore performed an important service in making this community accessible to the general reader. He begins by giving us an overview of the current state of scholarship, pointing out how much it has moved on since the classical works on the subject were written nearly a century ago. This provides an important introduction to his own work, which constantly refers to this scholarship in his narrative. However, the bulk of the material is drawn from primary sources, both literary and epigraphic, and this is the book's great strength. We are introduced to the people as they expressed themselves – at very different levels to be sure, but with a coherence which allows a credible picture to be reconstructed.

Evidence is most plentiful for Egypt, not merely because of its dry climate but also because Jews were established there much earlier than in other parts of the Mediterranean world. In a very real sense Alexandria was their cultural capital, a position which it retained until the middle years of the first century AD, when anti-Jewish feeling began to gain the upper hand in the city. After AD 38 Jews were increasingly restricted in what they could do, and before long resentment turned to rebellion. Eventually there was a full-scale revolt, and at the end of Trajan's reign (116- 17) the Egyptian Jewish community was effectively wiped out.

Things were less dramatic elsewhere, but even so there was a growing anti-Jewish climate in New Testament times which was naturally exacerbated by

the Jewish revolt in Palestine (66-73). As time went on, the cohabitation between Jews and Gentiles which had been common in pre-imperial times gave way either to assimilation of the Jews into the Gentile community or to confrontation and increasing separation. Dr Barclay is careful to point out that many Jews were effectively assimilated to their surroundings well before AD 70, and he suggests that many must have concealed their identity deliberately. We cannot know this for certain of course, but there is enough circumstantial evidence to make his thesis plausible, and modern parallels can be cited in support of the 'naturalness' of such a process. But there was also resistance to this, as Dr Barclay points out by drawing on the rich apocryphal literature which has survived from this period.

Perhaps more surprisingly, there was also movement the other way, and Dr Barclay cites instances of Gentiles being attracted to Judaism even after the catastrophe in Palestine. Where he is less surefooted is in his treatment of the early Christians, and especially his chapter on Paul, which seems to be almost totally misguided. Dr Barclay sees Paul as 'anomalous' within a Diaspora Jewish setting, and that belief colours his entire narrative. He recognizes that Paul is much more Jewish in his orientation than Hellenistic, and points out the extent to which much of the research which has been done on him in this context has missed its target. But then he does the same thing from a different angle.

The key to understanding the Apostle Paul and his 'anomalous' status must surely be the fact that he was converted to Christ and it is in that context that we see him at work. He tells us himself that he became a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks in order to win them both to Christ, so the attempt to draw exaggerated distinctions between the Paul of Romans and the portrait of him given in Acts 17, for example (p 391), seems fundamentally mistaken. Paul was both a Hebrew of the Hebrews and an adept communicator to Gentiles – and why not? It is not the man who was anomalous but his mission, and surely everyone has always recognized that. Dr Barclay has tried to impose a pattern on Paul which he cannot fit and thus has given us a distorted impression of him.

This is a pity because so much else in the book is exceedingly valuable. His outline of Philo, for instance, will serve as an excellent introduction to his work, which is sorely needed. The many passages on Josephus are equally good, and provide beginners and non-specialists with the right sort of portrait. Dr Barclay promises us another book on the Pauline churches, and it must be hoped that in it he will rise to the high standards he has set for himself in most of this work, and not succumb to a rather facile assessment of the great Apostle.

GERALD BRAY

RETRIBUTION AND ESCHATOLOGY IN CHRONICLES *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplements* 211 Brian E Kelly
Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1996 £35 hb ISBN 1850755795

This monograph, a revised PhD thesis submitted to Bristol University, is a scholarly critique of certain time-honoured opinions about the meaning of Chronicles. Chronicles has a long history in Old Testament scholarship as a kind of Cinderella who has never quite made it to the ball, but which has played an important part in the development of criticism, largely because of its alleged inferiority both as history writing and as theology. In recent years the Chronicler has enjoyed a measure of rehabilitation, with greater respect for his serious use of historical sources. Kelly's thesis is in line with that development, but focuses more on the theology of the book, which he thinks has been undervalued because misconstrued.

The title of the book raises two issues which have been at the centre of Chronicles scholarship. The Chronicler has widely been thought to have perpetuated a theology of retribution that was crude and mechanical: good actions were rewarded and bad ones punished according to a rigid pattern, and with immediate effect. This retribution was not only 'immediate' but also 'individual'. Such a construct contrasted with the picture in Kings of a long, slow accumulation of Israel's guilt, and patience on Yahweh's part that finally ran out when he brought the punishment of the Babylonian exile on his people. The stories of Manasseh in Kings and Chronicles respectively (2 Kings 21; 2 Chr 33) illustrate the difference between the two works, the latter containing an account of this king's repentance and restoration that is completely lacking in 2 Kings.

Kelly does not dispute that the Chronicler has painted a different picture of the pattern of retribution from Kings (p 48), but he offers an interpretation that challenges the consensus. In a nutshell (though nutshells are poor receptacles to accommodate careful and detailed arguments) he thinks that the strong emphasis on repentance in Chronicles is meant to demonstrate the extent of Yahweh's readiness to forgive and start again with his people. The time for punishment is past; it was the mission of Kings to show a way forward from the disaster of exile. The Chronicler writes well after the exile, and wants to show a community restored to its ancient land, but still in thrall to an imperial power, and that God has bounty yet to give to a people who will 'humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways' (2 Chr 7:14). Happily this passage, which seems to enjoy a good deal of currency in modern evangelical spirituality, turns out to be the epicentre of the Chronicler's message.

With the focus on grace stressed by Kelly, the balance is moved away from any kind of mechanical doctrine of rewards to an affirmation of

Yahweh's intention to bless, even in spite of a history of sin. This puts the Chronicler firmly in line with the mainstream of Old Testament theology, instead of making him the father of stultifying ecclesiology. And it is here that the connection between retribution and eschatology is made. In traditional Chronicles criticism, there was no place for eschatology; the book's focus on cultic matters seemed to bespeak a satisfaction with the *status quo*, resignation to living in the good graces of an indulgent emperor (after all, King Cyrus had handed out passports to Jews willing to repatriate), and a readiness to become a 'religious' community. The rediscovery of a theology of grace unsettles that picture, and opens up the possibility of future promise. The exact shape of the hope offered by the Chronicler is not easy to perceive, but it is clear that the time of David and Solomon is presented as an ideal, in which Israel occupied its land, and the covenant had come to full realization. The Chronicler's focus on the temple and its personnel should be seen as an affirmation of the permanence of the ancient Davidic promise. The Davidic king and his house is closely associated with the kingdom of God. Far from the Chronicler being satisfied with a meagre *status quo* he encourages expectancy that God can establish his kingdom again in Israel.

The thesis involves a view of the Chronicler's method. His work falls within the parameters of historiography in his time, but it is clearly rhetorical. Addressed urgently to the Chronicler's contemporaries, it shows that the history of God's people has now moved beyond the time of judgment (told in Kings), and even beyond the uncertain beginnings of Ezra-Nehemiah (which were written earlier in Kelly's opinion), to a time of genuine opportunity for the realization of God's kingdom. It is a book, then, that deserves not to be tucked unostentatiously after Kings, as a 'book of things omitted' (the Septuagint's concept, and thus the standard canonical order of our Christian Bibles), but that is fit to close the canon triumphantly, as it does for Jewish readers – though the Chronicler hardly suspected how his vision of a Davidic kingdom on earth might result, a few centuries after his time, in a final end to the 'exile' of God's people.

Brian Kelly's interpretation of Chronicles is scholarly, well-written and in my view well-founded. It requires a committed reader, but will pay dividends.

GORDON McCONVILLE

JOSHUA Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries **Richard Hess**
Leicester: IVP 1996 320pp £9.99 pb ISBN 0-85111-849-6

Richard Hess has filled an important gap in the Tyndale Old Testament series. His view of the book of Joshua is that it reports historical events, and is evidence for Israel's conquest of Canaan under Joshua in the late

second millennium BC. While he accepts in many ways the prevailing view that Joshua is part of a larger 'Deuteronomistic' History, he denies that this compels a dating in the seventh and sixth centuries BC, arguing that so-called Deuteronomistic style need not be confined to those periods, nor even to Israel, and adducing arguments from the ancient world in support. Indeed, the special strength of the volume is the author's good grounding in the historical background to Joshua, which he deploys effectively to answer some of the hard questions that readers are likely to ask. For example, he makes a plausible case for the historical factuality of the narratives concerning Jericho and Ai, whose archaeology is often thought to present insurmountable difficulties for a historical reading. Some readers will find more on the linguistic and archaeological background than they need; yet the book should not be criticized for having made the author's learning on these topics available.

The author is also concerned to make the commentary theologically relevant, and he traces a number of important themes: the Holy War and 'ban' of destruction; land as inheritance; the holy and redeeming God; and the covenant between God and Israel. Theological and spiritual points, with allusions to the New Testament, are frequently made the basis of the exegesis of the text. And generally there is much good, interesting interpretation; examples that deserve mention are his treatment of the relationship between the Passover and the conquest/Holy War; the relation of the Ark narrative (Josh 3-4) to the later Ark narrative in 2 Samuel 5-6.

I have one serious argument with the interpretation, and it concerns the sparing of Rahab. On this topic Hess has been led by the inclusion of the Canaanite woman in the list of heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 into a highly positive interpretation of her part in the drama of Joshua 2. Briefly, he regards Rahab's confession of faith in Yahweh as genuine, and as a sufficient ground for the sparing of her and her family. I am not sure that this is a correct reading of the text of Joshua. A close reading, rather, suggests the question as to why the spies have been sent in the first place? Was Joshua right to do so, when he had had no instruction from the Lord (2:1)? Why, consequently, has the cause of Israel apparently been entrusted to this member of a population that has been condemned? And what has really been added to Israel by the whole expedition, since God has given the enemy into its hands? The commentary tends to suppose that Joshua's actions are to be taken as right ones. But we are entitled to question that premise, especially in view of the Old Testament commands that allow no compromise with the Canaanites (Deut 7:2-3). It has been suggested that the sparing of Rahab introduces a theme in the book that will become more and more significant as the story progresses, namely the failure of Israel, by compromises here and there, fully to take its promised inheritance. Such a view accounts better for the data, which cannot be

pushed so readily into an 'evangelical' mould.

The real problem with the evaluation of Rahab is more serious. The interpretation of Rahab's confession as 'saving faith' in New Testament terms is arguably a category mistake. But the extrapolation from it, to the belief that the other inhabitants of Canaan could have been 'saved' as well, if only they had behaved like Rahab (p 96) is unwarranted and fails to solve the difficult theological problem arising from the 'ban'. Did the Israelites allow the Canaanites everywhere time and opportunity to believe in their God before cutting them to pieces? This 'repent or die' theology finishes with a far worse 'moral' problem than the one it is intended to solve. In any treatment of Joshua, the theology of the 'ban' has to be faced and accounted for in the terms of the narrative itself, and there is no apology for it there.

I have focussed on this point because it recurs in the commentary, and is the best clue to the author's point of view, which will no doubt be more congenial to many readers than it was to me. However, I do not wish the point to detract from the fact that the commentary is scholarly and well-written, and a very welcome addition to our resources on this part of the Old Testament.

GORDON McCONVILLE

WHOREDOM: God's Unfaithful Wife in Biblical Theology

Raymond C Ortlund Jr

Leicester: IVP 1996 200pp £12.99 pb ISBN 0 85111 511 X

Expectations of a book with such a title are varied, and the frequent response from others is that of surprise. One unsuspecting observer thought that his views of theology were confirmed when he saw that a book had been devoted entirely to the theme of 'whoredom'! In addition, it claims to be an exercise in biblical theology, a discipline with numerous possible interpretations. Yet, despite such odds, this work is nothing short of excellent.

Ortlund traces the themes of whoredom, harlotry and unfaithfulness through the whole scope of biblical literature. The entire analysis is set in a framework of creation, fall and ultimate redemption. Ortlund demonstrates with great clarity how these themes are not mere incidentals to the biblical narrative, but combine to present one of many major strands that weave the stories of Israel and the Church together. The second chapter deals with a number of passages from the Pentateuch and beyond, whilst the third deals with the powerful imagery used by Hosea. This in itself would serve as a useful introduction to the theology of that book, as could the fifth chapter which deals with the material from Ezekiel. However, Ortlund does not

leave his biblical theology confined only to the Old Testament, and provides careful exegesis of material from the gospels, from James, and from Revelation. The penultimate chapter is perhaps the best, as it draws together all of the different uses of the metaphor. Not only is the image of prostitution used to condemn Israel's failings, not only are we offered a vision of the perfect Bridegroom and his Bride, the Church, but as our understanding of the biblical drama develops we are given lessons which enrich our understanding of human marriage as well.

Perhaps this last fact is one of the more exciting facets of this form of 'biblical theology'. As Ortlund draws all of the evidence together, the theme of 'God's unfaithful wife' impacts our understanding of a huge range of topics – for example, Israel's history, God's judgment and love, God's promise and forbearance and jealousy, the Church and its relationship to the perfect bridegroom, the nature of the future which will surpass even the best marriage relationships on earth, the nature of spiritual and physical prostitution, and the extent to which the Church should be involved in the world of politics. With such a range of topics in view, it is only understandable that Ortlund does not have the space to develop some of these ideas. It would have been helpful to have some of the practical implications worked out, but perhaps that would be a different book.

There are many great surprises in store in this work. For example, a much needed theological argument for why pre-marital sex is wrong, not just a pragmatic argument; how true repentance restores sinners as if virginity had been restored; and the way in which some translations have toned down the language in order to lessen offence (with perhaps the unfortunate effect of lessening the impact).

The work concludes with a wise and helpful response to some of the more radical feminist critiques of the harlot metaphor. Throughout the book good use is made of footnotes, such that detailed remarks on translation are retained, yet taken out of the main body of the text for readers not concerned with such matters. Ortlund has provided us with an excellent exercise in biblical theology, thoroughly recommended for students, scholars and preachers.

TONY GRAY

WALKING IN THE WAYS OF THE LORD Christopher J H Wright
Leicester: Apollos 1995 319pp £15.99 pb ISBN 0-85111-444-X

In this collection of previously published essays, Chris Wright develops a number of important themes in the area of Old Testament ethics. Building on his previous *Living as the People of God*, this work bursts forth with the same enthusiasm and passion which characterized that first book. The ethical

authority of the Old Testament is a much neglected and misunderstood subject, and this book provides a healthy corrective to this trend.

The first section sets a foundation for the use of the Bible in social ethics and looks at the authority of Scripture in an age of relativism. Continually referred back to by the other chapters, for those new to Wright's work and whole approach (and use of triangles!) this is an excellent introduction. The main body of the book surveys a variety of approaches to Old Testament ethics, and will be of help to those involved in current theological study, or to those whose only impression of the Old Testament and ethics remains largely negative. Yet Wright is never content to leave his analysis as a survey of Israel's own story, but always presses on to explore its relevance to the issues of today. The most helpful is the examination of the ethical relevance of Israel as a society (which interacts with the still important work of Gottwald), and his attempt to steer Christians away from indifference.

The final part of the book pulls together five essays on a selection of issues including theology and ethics of the land, and the jubilee year. Particularly incisive is his essay on human rights, which attempts to bring Old Testament ethics to bear on this much over-used concept. Although a philosophical analysis of the terms used in the modern debate is missing, Wright brings correctives to both a humanistic interpretation of 'rights', and the often glib Christian attempt to replace talk of rights with talk of responsibilities. Throughout the work there are many gems to discover – for example, the way Wright illustrates the relevance of Wisdom literature to ethical decision making, and the discussion of the conditions that are entailed in God's covenant promise (forcing us to reconsider what we mean when we claim that God's promises are unconditional).

Most books of this kind fail because of their nature – that is, they are merely collections of essays. However, although these pieces were originally given in varying contexts and so with different aims, the force and weight of them makes any such difficulty disappear. An important collection, bringing together essays that deserve to have a wider audience than originally given, and a work that is a joy and an inspiration to read.

TONY GRAY

THE MOST HOLY PLACE: Sermons on the Song of Solomon

C H Spurgeon

Fearn Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications 1996 607pp £19.99 hb
ISBN 1 85792 195X

Perhaps the most apt quotation for the republication of Charles Spurgeon's

sermons may be taken from Hebrews 11:4, '...he being dead yet speaketh', for the popularity of his works has not diminished over the last hundred years. During his life, although he was unpopular with those who were downgrading the biblical faith in the nineteenth century, his standing amongst those who wished to remain faithful to the Scriptures remained high. According to the publishers, when the last of the sermons was published in 1917, over one hundred million copies had been sold.

It is interesting to consider both his popularity and unpopularity. There is one reason for both and it becomes quite plain in the reading of these sermons. Spurgeon by the grace of God had never lost his first love for the Lord. It is reflected in the first of the letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor. Ephesus was sound in doctrine and holy in life but it had lost its first love. The warning is given that unless that first love is restored the lamp stand will be removed. The great danger for the orthodox is that one may become so involved in the various disciplines of theology that fellowship with Christ is impaired. Theology without Christ is ultimately an arid exercise of intellect.

The publishers have done the Christian public a service by drawing together a number of Spurgeon's sermons on the Song of Solomon: some fifty-two in all. Here is Spurgeon at his best and where he is most at home in preaching the 'unsearchable riches of Christ'. Whatever interpretation modern scholarship wishes to place upon the Song, for Spurgeon the context is quite clear that it is the Lord's love for his people. This is the main theme which runs through all the Sermons and it is a theme which needs to be recovered both in personal devotions and public preaching.

DAVID STREATER

WHY FOUR GOSPELS? Donald Bridge

Fearn: Christian Focus 1996 203pp £9.99 pb ISBN 1-85792-225-5

Does Donald Bridge successfully answer the question posed by his title? The conclusion must be that he does so admirably. Each of the four writers has a particular readership in mind and chooses his material accordingly. This gives us four portraits of Jesus, supplementing each other, as none of them on its own presents the whole truth. This is demonstrated by a rich survey of their contents in three chapters on each of the synoptic gospels and four devoted to the fourth.

It seems to your reviewer that this should determine the way the gospels are handled in the pulpit. There may well be a place for a harmony of the gospels of the kind that Tatian produced in the second century AD, and which is necessary in producing a complete account of the life of Jesus.

But if the gospels are always treated in this way in the pulpit, so that it becomes a matter of indifference on which gospel a sermon is based, the distinctive witness which the Holy Spirit inspired each writer to give is obscured.

The book also provides reassurance of the reliability of the gospel records as both the external and internal evidence for their authenticity is assembled. It demonstrates their right to be taken seriously like any other ancient writing, even by those who are not yet convinced of their divine inspiration. They contain what J B Phillips has called 'The Ring of Truth'. Unlike the assumptions of many liberal scholars which permeate so much of what is served up by the media, the gospels not only convey truth, but are factually and historically true.

The author gives us the benefit of his wide reading and long experience as pastor, evangelist and preacher. His book is full of useful quotations, illustrations and examples of the converting power of the gospels, some from his own ministry. It abounds in helpful insights and suggestive ideas which could enrich many a sermon. He shows the kind of person to which each gospel is directed, which would help decide which gospel to use in evangelistic literature distribution.

This book would be helpful not only for preachers but for any thinking Christian who wishes to strengthen his confidence in and improve his knowledge of the gospels. It is easy to read, but should be read unhurriedly. I would like to see more books of this calibre on church bookstalls and given prominence in the catalogues of Christian booksellers.

KENNETH PRIOR

ALONE IN THE UNIVERSE? The X Files, aliens and God

David Wilkinson

Crowborough: Monarch 1997 160pp £7.99 pb ISBN 1-85424-373-X

David Wilkinson, who is now a university Methodist chaplain, gained a doctorate in Theoretical Astrophysics before his ordination, and is the author of a number of first-class apologetic works relating to his speciality, two of which I reviewed in a previous number of *Churchman* (1996-2 p 179). This excellent book deals with a question which the scientifically-aware enquirer will sooner or later ask: with the earth continually shrinking into total insignificance compared with the unutterable immensity of the physical universe, can we believe that we are the only living intelligences present? It is to some a serious question for biblical faith, since the Bible does not seem to pre-empt the issue. C S Lewis deals with it briefly in his essay *Religion and Rocketry*. This treatment goes

much further. It is much fuller in its content of scientific information and know how of course, for the author is trading in his own home country; but it speaks also to the more popular and topical side of things, familiar to the science fiction fan and TV addict. His chapter headings will give some idea of this: *The truth out there?*; *Close encounters of the scientific kind*; *Calling occupants of interplanetary craft*; *Was Jesus a space alien?*; *Some alien problems for God* are some of them. The treatment is thoughtful, well-informed, fair and well-referenced. It is not calculated to get hackles up; rather its arguments are fairly and courteously presented. It is the sort of book to give to an interested sixth-former or business colleague; but it may be valuable too in opening the eyes of the mature believer to the vast suggestiveness of such a passage as Romans 8:18-39.

There are five pages of Notes; two of suggestions for Further Reading (containing among others, titles by such eminent non-Christian writers as Francis Crick, Paul Davies, and Fred Hoyle); and a general Index of six. An excellent book; I wish it a wide circulation.

DOUGLAS C SPANNER

CHRISTIANS IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE Law, Gospel and Public Policy Essays by C E B Cranfield, David Kilgour MP, John Warwick Montgomery

Edmonton: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology and Public Policy 1996
 348pp No price pb ISBN 1-896363-05-9

This work consists of a brief essay *Christian Politicians in the 1990's* by David Kilgour, Speaker of the Canadian House of Commons, and a substantial 1962 article by C E B Cranfield *The Christian's Political Responsibility According to the New Testament*, with sandwiched between a series of articles by J W Montgomery some of which (from *Christianity Today*) go back as far as 1970. All this may not seem very commendatory, but in fact I found this book gripping. It should be said that Dr Montgomery has held high academic positions in Canada and the United States in the subjects of history and law, and that he is now Professor of Law and Humanities at Luton in England. The book has two main thrusts. The first is that Christians should make their voices heard in public debate on issues about which Scripture is clear (such as divorce, abortion and anti-blasphemy law), but to do so with realistic wisdom. Despite the strongly American culture for which he writes, his position is surely appropriate for us in Britain. A main plank is this: God's laws, according to Scripture, are designed for our well-being. That they are well-designed for this end should be capable of being pointed out to the majority (at least) of thinking men and women. It is a wrong tactic therefore to argue in public debate that we must obey them because according to the Bible they are God-given, for it takes a particular faith to believe this and the majority

of men and women do not have it. Especially in a pluralistic culture it is more sound and more biblical 'to offer arguments on scientific, social and ethical grounds potentially meaningful to the non-Christian'.

The second thrust is a strong defence of the (classic) evangelical faith especially as it concerns the plenary inspiration of the Bible. He has a fine chapter entitled *The Jury returns: A Juridical Defense of Christianity*. Here he stresses the fact that 'the historic Christian claim differs qualitatively from the claims of all other world religions at the epistemological point: on the issue of testability'. All other religions, including Islam, make faith-experience the test: it is self-validating they say. But this is a position impossible to maintain in debate! Christianity alone makes 'the truth of its absolute claims rest squarely on certain historical facts open to ordinary investigation' (one thinks at once of Acts 17:31). The author points out that this makes a lawyer's training particularly adapted to the task of apologetics; for the heart of a lawyer's task (in contrast to the philosopher-theologian's) is centred on ascertaining the facts as particulars of real history. I much enjoyed this fine chapter. There are many others, but I must whet the appetite with a mention of only one, *The Search for Ultimates*. It replays some hitherto unpublished and faded documents of the Sherlock Holmes Society of London found recently in Dr Watson's battered tin dispatch-box: notes of a religious dialogue in September 1901 between him and Sherlock Holmes which Watson, to raise Holmes from terminal lassitude, mischievously provoked. Watson persistently, and extremely cleverly, argues for the higher critical view of the Holy Scriptures. Many a time he seems to have cornered Holmes, but each time Holmes crushes him in his inimitable style! Finally Watson plays a trump card. 'Precisely, old fellow' says Holmes. But now...'. And Watson lapses into silence.

It is quite an enthralling chapter. Professor Montgomery is always careful in his logic, well-informed about his subject, pleasant in his delivery and wide in his interests. Get this book and give it to readers who are intelligent, open-minded, eager, but as yet lacking in conviction. I recommend it strongly.

DOUGLAS C SPANNER

CELEBRATING THE ANGLICAN WAY Ian Bunting ed

London: Hodder & Stoughton 1996 256pp £12.99 pb ISBN 0 340 64268 8

Celebrating the Anglican Way is a beautifully produced collection of essays. The book covers three themes: Anglican believing, belonging and behaving. It is written for the intelligent enquirer who wants to be informed about the life and worship of the Anglican church. The eighteen contributors, fifteen men and three women include the Archbishop of Canterbury and the controversial Michael Vasey. Despite this diversity the

book has been well edited so that it is coherent in style and content.

Celebrating the Anglican Way is a pleasant, easy read which admirably achieves its aim. It is well illustrated with a rich variety of black and white photographs as well as a number of poignant cartoons. I particularly like the way in which brief paragraphs from Anglican documents are placed in shaded boxes in the margins. This means that the chapters can either be enjoyed without interruption or alternatively, the reader can pause to take stock of relevant primary source material.

The essayists set out to attract the reader to all that is positive in the Anglican tradition. Their writing is warm and empathetic in tone and the authors reveal their love and enthusiasm for all things Anglican. The book certainly leaves the reader impressed with a rich variety of Anglican worship styles, traditions, theological emphases and social and political interaction. As one would expect from a book of this kind, it is perhaps a little bland in tone. None of the deep rifts within contemporary Anglicanism over issues such as inclusive language, homosexual clergy and cathedral services, co-habitation, divorce and re-marriage, multi-faith worship, the ordination of women, lay celebration of communion and financial mismanagement, really surface in the text. There are one or two minor inaccuracies. For example, page 36 states that Maurice 'had much influence on founding trade unions'. In fact he opposed them (see for example E Norman *The Victorian Christian Socialists* (CUP, 1987 p 18). Page 137 states that Henry Venn founded the Clapham Sect and page 214 informs us that the Church Pastoral Aid Society was founded by Lord Shaftesbury in 1838.

There is a great deal of valuable information contained in this book. It recounts Anglican history in a lucid and interesting way and the reader is made to feel the Anglican church still has much to offer those who are searching to understand the Christian faith. I commend it as a good buy which is well worth reading.

NIGEL SCOTLAND

**THE RISE AND FALL OF THE NINE O'CLOCK SERVICE –
A Cult Within The Church? Roland Howard**

London: Mowbray 1996 160pp £6.99 pb ISBN 0 264 67429 7

'The NOS scandal wasn't to do with sex, it was about the abuse of power. But the Church of England doesn't close churches down if you complain that your leader seems power-crazed and psychologically abuses people' (p 141). This tragic comment is made by Marion, one of a number of victims of Chris Brain's cult-like church who give first hand accounts of their experiences at the end of Roland Howard's informative book. It is a

fascinating, yet also deeply disturbing read, not least because what would clearly qualify as a cult continued for years under the guise of a Church of England special project. The media and the Church made much of the sexual misconduct that had occurred in NOS when the scandal broke out in the Summer of 1995. But as Marion makes clear, that did not lie at the heart of the problem.

Roland Howard has made a careful study of Chris Brain's background and NOS after extensive interviewing over several months. His observations are valuable and insightful. However this book's true worth lies not in the fact that it is a work of deep theological reflection or discourse but because it merely aims to determine what happened when, and how it was allowed to happen. The key lesson from the whole debacle is certainly not that we should necessarily beware of alternative services or worship styles, or that we should be wary of Matthew Fox's theology, deeply problematic though that evidently is. The real concern is one of power, and its abuse. Chris Brain is a man who manipulated his way to a position of cultic domination over NOS. He is a complex character, and it is all too easy to paint a one-dimensional caricature. Howard seeks to avoid this, and does give a voice to those who still defend Brain to the hilt. His character flaws were nevertheless evident to all who were close to him, but he had manipulated them into such a position of cowering dependence and servitude that no one dared speak out against him. Consequently, the hypocrisy at the heart of NOS went unchallenged.

Howard draws this out perceptively. The ironies surrounding NOS fill the book. NOS had a national reputation for pioneering an open, egalitarian, progressive church structure with a clear emphasis on social and ecological justice, honesty and the simple Christian lifestyle. In reality it was deeply hierarchical and organized in concentric circles around Brain who occupied his unassailable throne at its heart. While many members of the congregation did indeed endeavour to live frugally and sacrificially, Brain lived in sumptuous luxury in a house fitted with state of the art mod-cons, surrounded by his 'Homebase team' of young girls from the church chosen specifically to live as his servants. Brain ruthlessly abused his position to keep members in check and maintain his position.

Once these extremes are described, and his deep character flaws laid bare, it is easy for readers of *Churchman* to indict Brain and all that he tried to achieve. But this book should be read simply because it implicitly warns of the pitfalls of being in a position of power, and the way sin grips and deludes. We may not be in authoritative positions which are as unaccountable to others as Brain had created for himself; but we are foolish and naive if we do not believe that we can nevertheless exert an astonishing degree of control over those to whom we are ministering. How

easy it would be to create a team around us of 'yes-men', to ensure that criticism never comes our way. As a wise friend once said, 'A congregation will want to put their leader on a pedestal, and the leader will want to be there'. Brain certainly was an example of the latter occurring, and there is no intrinsic reason why it should not happen to others who have a more conservative theology. 'So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!' (1 Cor 10:12).

MARK MEYNELL

ALPHA, NEW LIFE OR NEW LIFESTYLE – A biblical assessment of the Alpha Course Elizabeth McDonald

Great Britain: St Matthew Publications 1996 32pp No price
ISBN 0 9524672 6 7

It is difficult not to get caught up in the wave of enthusiasm spreading amongst British churches for the Alpha course. The statistics are impressive. Reaching an estimated three hundred and eighty thousand people in fifty-five countries world-wide, the course has been run in churches of all denominations and has attracted the attention of national newspapers. Evangelical Christians in particular will be keen to consider carefully every opportunity for reaching large numbers of people with the good news of Christ but success by itself is insufficient reason for using any programme.

This booklet aims to assess the content, background and results of the Alpha course from a biblical perspective. In doing so it provides an excellent summary of some of the major issues facing evangelical churches today. Well researched and clearly thought out, this is not a book for those who are unprepared to test everything honestly in the light of Scripture. For those, like myself, who have run Alpha courses and struggled with the sections which appear unbiblical or unbalanced, this booklet will help to clarify the specific nature of their concerns. As such it will be invaluable in helping them to adjust both the scope and content of the course, as many churches now do, to achieve a more biblical balance. Alternatively, it might encourage them to try other similar courses or to develop their own.

Elizabeth McDonald's intention is to examine the ultimate aims of the course to find out what sort of gospel is being preached. Her assessment leads to discussion of Alpha's connection with the 'Toronto Blessing', the Latter-Rain movement, power evangelism and parallels with the 'new age' philosophies. Practical issues are covered, such as the limited time spent on the course on basic beliefs as opposed to sessions on Christian living (so that many non-Christians are left still asking fundamental questions when the course has moved on to 'How does God guide us?'), and the

issue of whether Alpha can be 'adapted' to Roman Catholic doctrine.

The layout of the booklet is somewhat confusing (a table of contents would help) but there are sections dealing with each of the Alpha sessions which raise concerns, and appendices by Philip Foster (examining the content of New Testament preaching) and Ian Lewis (a reprint of an article from *Evangelicals Now* covering experience of using an adapted Alpha course).

Bible believing Christians who are concerned to proclaim the gospel clearly will find much to instruct, challenge and motivate them in this booklet.

MARK UNDERHILL

TRIUMPHS OF THE SPIRIT IN RUSSIA

Donald Nicholl

London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1997 244pp £9.95 pb
ISBN 0-232-52191-3

When historians come to assess the spiritual life of the twentieth century, it seems almost certain that they will assign a major place to the widespread and fruitful contacts which have developed between Eastern Orthodox and Western Christians at all levels. Russian spirituality in particular has attracted an audience which extends well beyond the bounds of the Church, thanks to the political importance of the country and the tragic events which have taken place there in our time. It is especially sad that the Russia which Donald Nicholl celebrates was brutally destroyed even before interest in it was awakened in the West – largely, it must be said, by refugees from the catastrophe.

Of course it is easy to romanticize about bygone eras, and we should certainly view with some scepticism the idyllic picture of Russian peasant life which Donald Nicholl paints for us. This is a fairly standard line among Russian religious intellectuals, but the truth is that the Russian village of the last century was as noted for cruelty and barbarism as it was for kindness and spirituality. It all depends who you talk to and what perspective you take. To portray the Russian peasant as deeply religious is to confuse folklore with true Christianity. Baptised paganism is a far more accurate description of the Russian peasant soul than the Sermon on the Mount, and the confusion between religious devotion and nationalism is one which continues to haunt the Russian Orthodox Church in the post-Soviet era. To take but one example, anti-Semitism is alive and well in Russia today, and has the support of some leading church figures – hardly the best expression of that evangelical humility which is supposed to be so characteristic of the average Russian Christian.

This is not to say that there have not been many outstanding examples of true and deep Christian spirituality in Russia. There most certainly have been, and at its best, the Russian tradition has a great deal to teach all of us. Donald Nicholl concentrates on four figures, each of whom represents one way in which the Christian message has expressed itself with a peculiarly Russian tinge. By far the most familiar of these four is the great novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky. It is hard to think that there is anything new that can be said of him, but this book sets him in a wider context and reminds us that he was not an isolated figure. Even in his own lifetime, and despite persecution from the authorities (or perhaps because of it), Dostoyevsky had an enormous impact on his own country, which has only grown in the years since. It would be no exaggeration to say that his writings, which could never be totally banned by the Soviet regime, awakened the interest of many Russians in the gospel, and no doubt they will continue to exercise this powerful influence for generations to come.

The first figure Donald Nicholl deals with is St Seraphim of Sarov (1758-1833) who had a widespread reputation as a holy man (*starets* in Russian) in the early years of the nineteenth century. This tradition is well-known in the Orthodox world but is more or less completely foreign to the West, which makes Donald Nicholl's account so interesting and valuable. The disinterested observer might well feel that he is a little too accepting of some of the legends which have grown up around St Seraphim, but even if we discount those, it is quite clear that we are dealing here with an extraordinary man who has no real counterpart elsewhere. The second figure Donald Nicholl brings to our attention is that of the Russian philosopher Nikolai Fyodorov, who died in 1903. Fyodorov was not a Christian really, at least not in any orthodox sense, but there is no doubt that he was deeply influenced by Christian motifs, and particularly by the resurrection, which plays such a major role in the Russian Church. It is quite probable that most readers of this book will be encountering Fyodorov for the first time, and Donald Nicholl must be congratulated for bringing him to the notice of a wider public. For all his eccentricities (and they were many) Fyodorov certainly deserves to be more widely known than he is.

The third figure Donald Nicholl brings to our notice is Dostoyevsky, followed by Pavel Florensky, an extraordinary priest-scientist who continued to serve the Soviet state as an open dissident until he was finally shot in 1937. Florensky's unique blend of the traditional and the modern makes him a particularly interesting person to study, especially for Westerners who have long been preoccupied with the relationship between religion and science. Florensky brings a peculiarly Orthodox perspective to this, and it is here that his contribution is most original.

In the concluding chapters Donald Nicholl gives us some general

observations, as well as potted biographies of a series of Soviet dissidents who suffered for their convictions. Not all of these were Christians, and at least one, Evgenia Ginzburg, was a lifelong Marxist and ardent member of the Communist party. Her story is certainly a tragic one, and her courage remarkable, but whether it is really in tune with a book like this is more doubtful. Once more we are faced with the problem of distinguishing what is Christian from what is merely Russian, or even just human. It is good to be reminded that Christians do not have a monopoly on virtue, but we must then ask ourselves whether there is anything compelling about the gospel. In the end, Christians have to say that there is, however noble some human spirits may be, the essence of truth lies not in our own achievements, but in what Jesus Christ did for us on the Cross. Our spirituality is a response to his action, without which it is incomprehensible. There are many people mentioned in this book who knew that, and who lived out that truth in the most appalling circumstances. Their message will always retain its freshness and vigour, and Donald Nicholl is to be congratulated for having brought them to our attention in such a striking and memorable way.

GERALD BRAY

THE NEW TESTAMENT A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings Bart D Ehrman

Oxford: OUP 1997 437pp pb ISBN 0-19-508481-0

This is a handbook of New Testament studies intended mainly for students. It is especially geared for the needs of those with little background, presenting the material in an easy to read format and including such things as a list of Old Testament books for the convenience of those who do not actually possess a Bible themselves. Dr Ehrman teaches at the University of North Carolina in what is popularly known as the American Bible belt, and this clearly has affected his approach to the subject. He himself claims that his presentation is 'objective', which is another way of saying that it is unmarked by any form of Christian belief. He is careful to protect himself against his students by saying that it is perfectly possible, even respectable, to study the Scriptures from the perspective of a believer, but as far as he is concerned, he thinks it is more helpful to avoid questions of faith and present the 'facts' as 'most modern scholars' accept them.

In practice this means that his approach is basically a rehash of Walter Bauer's famous (and largely discredited) thesis that 'orthodoxy' was merely one tendency among many in the early church, and that what we have learned to call heresies were initially perfectly valid forms of Christianity. Dr Ehrman achieves this perspective by allowing anyone who claims to be a Christian the right to be so called, and he even extends this into modern

times by recognizing Jehovah's Witnesses as part of the wider church!

This does not mean, of course, that the book does not contain a vast amount of useful information, and many people will be grateful to Dr Ehrman for having explained it all so clearly. But there can be no escaping the fact that it has a pronounced bias, concealed beneath its claim to objectivity, and that this bias is fundamentally hostile to the Christian faith. Believers must therefore use it with caution and (hopefully) produce something better, which will make recourse to it unnecessary

GERALD BRAY

A TASK UNFINISHED Michael Griffiths

Crowborough: MARC (Monarch Publications) 1996 185pp £5.99 pb
ISBN 1-85424-313-6

Michael Griffiths is very much a world mission guru and for many years he has been urging and teaching Christians to get involved. This latest book *A Task Unfinished* grasps just how much world mission involves the whole congregation.

He is well placed to teach and direct us. He has served as a missionary in Japan and been General Director of OMF International. After nine years as Principal of London Bible College he was the Professor of Missiology at Regent College, Vancouver. This wealth of experience has produced a book of immense practical wisdom, shot through with flashes of vision and inspiration.

This is a book for local churches. World mission cannot be left to external societies or to the few who are qualified and available to go out from a church. Sending and support are as important a part of obedience to the great commission as going. It takes nine soldiers on active service to support one soldier at the front. All ten are vital to success. The reader should be prepared for the challenge of practical response, for new and even unsettling insights from Scripture and for the vision of nothing less than the involvement of the whole local congregation. In too many churches mission support is still a case of the 'ordinary' members leaving it to the 'enthusiasts'.

The author describes today's mission scene in terms of change: *change in the world* – positively, more countries than ever are open to the gospel and the world's population is distinctly mobile: negatively, today's pluralism has led many to the wrong kind of tolerance and disengagement from cross-cultural evangelism; *change in missionaries* – to match the four 'types' of mission today ie same country/same culture, same country/

different culture, overseas country/same culture, and overseas country/different culture; and *change in church life* – financially and in theology and experience.

There are some great stories of eccentrics in mission, such as Mildred Cable or John Athelstan Cheese and memorable illustrations of mission, like that of the rice seedlings (pp 32-3). The shafts of biblical insight are amongst the most striking aspects of the book. We are all familiar with the idea that the Church exists to worship God, but Michael simply points out that Jesus' last charge to his Church was a mission call, not a worship commission. Other flashes are the description of Jesus as the Chief Harvester (p 116), the reminder that Paul was a layman (p 124) and that 'tent-making' is the norm for all Christians in mission (p 134).

In mission ministers or pastors are key. It is their vision, passion and teaching – or lack of them – that are crucial to a local church's mission-mindedness. The author gives a model lead in teaching, in a wonderful section on friendship among God's people. It lights up from Scripture how we may pray and care at a distance. He speaks of the value of 'staff development'. It must, of course, in the first place be the Church that helps discern a call and gifts in people to go out in mission. It is the local church that matures and trains its members for obedience to the great commission. We must not 'unload our oddballs, loose cannon or doubtful starters on churches abroad'.

The chapter on the stages of a missionary's development and life, entitled 'Snakes and ladders', is eye-opening realistic. The one on prayer is both practical and motivating. 'Prayer is not getting my will done in heaven, but a way of getting God's will done on earth'.

As I finished the book I was glad we had just sent back a mission partner to the Far East and had absorbed a number of the truths the book presents. It is too close for comfort to be told that for many missionaries, being sent out feels like being amputated, or that once a congregation has delegated world mission to a committee, mission is then marginalised by the majority. I am glad to have something with which to encourage the missionary committee in our church, but more significantly, to motivate *all* the members.

In some ways there is little new in this book. It just needs to be said and taught again and again. We can be glad Michael Griffiths overcame his reluctance to write yet another book on mission. He has given us practical guidelines we cannot duck and a big vision we cannot miss.

DAVID BANTING

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