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Book Reviews

L.J. Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love: A New Biography on Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (Fearn, Tain, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2002), 491 pages.

Any new biography on the saintly Robert Murray M'Cheyne should be welcomed by those who would imitate his faith and practice. *Constrained By His Love*, a panoramic study of one of the Kingdom's godliest servants, is an English translation of Van Valen's Dutch original (1993) and is written by one with an obvious love for his subject.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne (1813-1843) was a man blessed with zeal and holiness in an era of lukewarmness and worldliness. Van Valen provides an excellent historical backdrop to M'Cheyne's life by discussing the effects of the Enlightenment, the Napoleonic Wars, and the stagnant state of the Scottish Kirk. In mapping the life of M'Cheyne, though, Van Valen pays particular attention to *spiritual* realities. Detailed attention is given to topics ranging from M'Cheyne's habits of prayer to his views on church discipline. Especially noteworthy are the relationships that M'Cheyne had with mentors, peers, and parishioners. In the truest sense, M'Cheyne was a *spiritual* friend to many.

One small criticism of the book concerns the decision to exclude footnotes. Those who are familiar with M'Cheyne will be frustrated in their attempts to sort out the sources of Van Valen's insights.

The life of M'Cheyne exemplified Christ-centred holiness lived out in the context of a turbulent era not unlike our own. As such, *Constrained By His Love* deserves a wide reading.

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Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, narrated Max McLean (CD; Morristown, New Jersey: Fellowship for the Performing Arts, 2004).

A stone marker marks the spot in Enfield, Connecticut, where what is probably the most famous sermon in American history was preached on July 8, 1741: *Sinners In the Hands of an Angry God*. It was the time of the First Great Awakening in America, when the Spirit of God was converting literally thousands and transforming communities on both sides of the Atlantic. The Enfield church, though, was seemingly oblivious to the revival, and the members generally had little or no concern for spiritual things. But the response that Sunday was dramatic.

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) had been invited to preach. His text was Deuteronomy 32:35-36, which speaks of the imminence of divine judgment. Before Edwards was finished preaching that evening there "was a great moaning & crying out" as people cried out for mercy and what they were to do to be saved. Though not an overly emotional discourse, Edwards, like other great preachers of that revival, minced no words when it came to sin. "Every unconverted man properly belongs to hell," he told the congregation. In very pointed language he urged upon his hearers the truth that those who have no interest in Jesus, the only mediator between God and fallen humanity, have absolutely "nothing to lay hold to save themselves" and "nothing to keep off the flames of wrath." All who have "never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God" are under God's wrath—they "are in the hands of an angry God."

This sermon has long been available in print form. This CD now makes it available in audio. Max Mclean, the President of the Fellowship for the Performing Arts, described by some as having "a clarion voice," does a superb job in narrating the sermon. The narration is

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taken from a modern-language adaptation of Edwards' sermon, that of John Jeffery Fanella. Some purists might object to using such an edition, but surely Edwards, who longed to reach sinners with the gospel, would approve. An introduction by R.C. Sproul is also included. Highly recommended.

NOTES

¹See, for instance, Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1992).

²See www.listenersbible.com/meet_max.

³Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, Made Easier to Read* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1996).

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Douglas Vickers, *The Fracture of Faith: Recovering Belief of the Gospel in a Postmodern World*. (Fearn, Tain, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 238 pages.

The late James Montgomery Boice, in the opening paragraph to *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?*, has stated, "These are not good days for the evangelical church, and anyone who takes a moment to evaluate the life and outlook of evangelical churches will understand that."¹ Why is this the case? According to Boice, and other such observers, the church has forgotten its theology. Douglas Vickers has done an excellent job recovering lost ground due to theological amnesia in *The Fracture of Faith*.

The abandonment of orthodox Christian theology has rendered the church defenseless against attacks from its postmodern surroundings. By reorienting us with historic Christian doctrine, Vickers has armed the church with enough ammunition to mount a major offensive against unbelieving thought as well as giving her the neces-

sary equipment for an impenetrable defense.

The book is structured around three triads that Vickers expresses as fundamental subjects in the field of Christian thought. The first triad is entitled *Christian Doctrine*, which includes creation, sin and the fall, and redemption. Each subject in the triad is dealt with in a balanced and thorough manner. We are given a basic, but not shallow, explanation of man's original state, his fall into sin, and the consequences thereof. Contemporary evangelicalism is seriously lacking in its understanding of mankind's sinful condition, which has a negative impact on the church. Vickers builds a solid foundation upon which he will structure the following two triads. Without the first triad properly in place, the other two will most definitely find themselves inadequate for the task of "recovering the gospel" in our postmodern age.

The second triad is *Christian Apologetics* and it includes being and reality—metaphysics; knowledge—epistemology; and behaviour—ethics. Here Vickers displays his reliance on an old friend, Cornelius Van Til, and his method of apologetics. Vickers is unashamedly Van Tillian, as he makes clear in the introduction to this book.² In the second triad we find one of the best interpretations of Van Til's views on metaphysics available today. Vickers upholds the balance of Van Til by maintaining that all reality must be subject to the Lordship of Christ without going to the extreme of Theonomy. When speaking on the nature of being, Vickers roots his understanding deeply in the Scriptures. The nature of God's being is explained as well as that of His creation, always maintaining a distinction between the two. Following Van Til, Vickers grounds all apologetic endeavours in the ontological Trinity. Many of today's apologists follow an Arminian system of thought. They start epistemologically with non-believing presuppositions and from there they try to bring the non-Christian along to Christian convictions. As Van Til noted, and Vickers reaffirms, there is no epistemological common ground be-

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tween the Christian and the non-Christian. Staying true to his Calvinistic convictions, Vickers starts *ontologically* with the being of God and argues for the gospel according to God's standards set forth in His Word. The impact that this method has on Christian ethics is enormous. Just as there are no neutral facts in reality, there are no neutral issues for the Christian when it comes to ethics. As Vickers states, "the Christian gospel is an address to the human person in the totality of his or her experience."³ The whole human is redeemed by Christ, and therefore everything that a redeemed human does should be subject to Christ's Lordship.

The third and final triad is the *Christian Life* and includes: effectual calling—regeneration; the benefits of effectual calling—justification, adoption and sanctification; and the eschatological hope. Here Vickers gives an account of *why* one is committed to the Christian faith, namely, through the act of regeneration by the Holy Spirit. This also needs to be properly understood by the Christian when seeking to engage culture with the gospel. Too many Christians believe that the powers of persuasion lie within themselves and their arguments. Instead, it is God who does the saving, and it is the Christian's job to be faithful to the message. What an encouragement this is for evangelism and apologetics!

The Christian lives in light of the eschatological hope of Christ's return, which spurs us on to honour God in our lives and theology. By virtue of our union with Christ, through justification, adoption and sanctification, we have been given the ability to live dependently on Christ until His return. This is the power and hope that the Christian draws upon while endeavouring to share the gospel with the culture around him.

What Vickers has put before his readers is a concise explanation of Christian doctrine and its application for living and evangelism. Vickers displays his dependence on the Westminster Theological Seminary school of thought by unashamedly announcing his reliance

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on Cornelius Van Til and John Murray—two theologians who were close to Vickers. This book will prove itself as a helpful aid to an ailing church. With its emphasis on the Lordship of Christ in all aspects of life, we are given the encouragement needed to engage our culture in a uniformly biblical manner.

The Fracture of Faith would be useful in a bible study for those wishing to gain an deep introductory understanding of the Christian faith and its application for our lives in today's culture.

NOTES

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace? Rediscovering the Doctrines That Shook the World* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2001), 19.

² Vickers, *The Fracture of Faith*, 10.

³ Vickers, *The Fracture of Faith*, 22.

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