

BOOK REVIEWS

Being Human in a Christian Perspective
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B.J. van der Walt

Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education:
Potchefstroom, South Africa. 1997. Pp. 83. ISBN 1-86822-257-8.

The small book is the text of a conference lecture given by the author, and a summary of material in an earlier book, *The liberating message: a Christian world view for Africa* (1994 & 1996 from the same publisher). Prof. Bennie van der Walt is Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Institute for Reformational Studies at Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, South Africa. He covers the present topic, a Christian view of man, under six characteristics: man is a sexual, holistic, multi-dimensional, religious, cultural, and individual-communal being. (The author explicitly states that he is using the term 'man' and masculine pronouns in a generic sense for convenience, and intends no gender prejudice).

Each topic is covered briefly, but is amazingly comprehensive through the use of numerous headings and lists of points, with concisely-worded and sometimes provocative comments (see the list of stereotype attitudes towards women in 1.5, for example). The text is assertive rather than persuasive in its style, and some readers might find its tone irritating. The book provides a useful summary of many important facets of our complex human nature. It reads more like a summary than a discussion, and offers a generalised account which slices through various controversial issues, such as the current gender debate. Although short, it is not simple. The author has worked hard to be clear, but makes few concessions in language, and refers to a number of other opinions and scholars. Some of those referred to will not be widely known, and there is no bibliography to follow them up.

The six topics are presented as separate chapterlets, and cover in order: the complementarity of human gender and sexuality; the unity of physical and spiritual aspects of our being; the complexity of our nature, an overview of competing religious systems, including the biblical system, and our creation in God's image and consequent falseness/sinfulness; the relational aspects of human nature, including personal relationships to God, other people and the creation; the complementarity between our individuality and our social dependence, and the danger of one swallowing the other. The book is rounded off by 12 pages of substantive discussion questions (70 questions listed). Van der Walt continually seeks to relate each topic to the African context.

One or two specific comments on points of special interest are worth making here. The author takes a nonsense stance with regard to the equality of the genders in all aspects of life, while respecting the obviously different biological roles of the two sexes (1.4, 1.6). While gender equality is sometimes a controversial matter, few can deny that our traditional societies, in North and South worlds, have often been overly authoritarian with regard to male supremacy. Two brief sections (1.8, 1.9) deal with marital fidelity and singleness, but nothing is said about either monogamy or polygamy. In dealing with the cultural diversity of the human community, the author misses addressing both inter-ethnic relationships and the issue of language diversity. The first is a tough one, but we need to address it urgently. Has Christianity anything substantive to offer in the area of inter-ethnic relations? If so, what is it? The second, that our group culture is strongly reflected in language, is surely one of the most neglected issues in the church's reflection today. This must be particularly the case in Africa where no nation state is monolingual (even excluding European languages). Our language no less than our culture needs to be confronted with the claims of Christ the King. A dangerous dualism lurking in many corners consists of worshipping God in French or English while fomenting disharmony through our vernacular languages. 'With the same tongue we praise God and curse men' (Jas 3:9), even as we may use different languages in each case. Finally, there is a good discussion of our human attitude and responsibility toward the natural world (5.3). Here too, Christian practice is much-criticised in the modern world, and responsible stewardship needs to be more central on the church's agenda.

In essence providing us with a potted systematic theology (although it is founded as much on socio-cultural anthropology as on the biblical text, and biblical references are rather few), van der Walt nevertheless builds on a set of characteristics that do not form the backbone of most traditional theological discussion, and uses a vocabulary that provides a much needed modern alternative to older theological texts. It is significant that he starts with gene, and the unity and complexity of human make-up, before coming to human religious

but fallen nature, and then moving off again to deal with cultural, social and individual aspects of our being. This approach has the effect of dealing with us as we find ourselves in our modern life-view, and of integrating our religious nature into our overall complexity. Indeed the fourth topic, man as a religious being, might well have come last, to provide an explanatory conclusion for the form our humanness takes.

The book deserves to be in the bibliography of theology courses for the provocative way in which it realises issues, but is too sweeping to be a text in itself. It will provide a good check list for theology teachers to make sure that serious current issues are covered (bearing in mind the omissions noted above). The book constantly returns to relational aspects of our nature, and to the ways in which observed two-sidedness in human nature reveals complementarity and not polarisation; in the author's terms, duality, but not dualism. This, in fact, probably sums up what is distinctive about the Christian view of human nature, and of religion itself.

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**Whole Gospel. Whole World: The Foreign Mission
Board of the Southern Baptist Convention**

William R. Estep

Nashville: Boradman and Holman, 1994

xx, 429 pp., many illustrations. ISBN 0-8054-1041-4

This book was written for the 150th jubilee of the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (USA) in 1994. The Policy Subcommittee of the Board gave the writing of the manuscript its oversight and approval. The book does not intend to be a history of all Southern Baptist missionary work, but only that done by the board which directs the denomination's foreign effort. In that effort, 38,741 Southern Baptist churches co-operate, supporting, 3,911 missionaries, working in 126 countries world wide (1994).

Since the book deals with a major mission present in many African countries, it is a useful resource in understanding this mission, some of whose policies differed considerably not only from those of the classical missions of the Great Awakening (today often called 'ecumenical') from among whom it originated, but also from those of other evangelical missions with whom it now associates.

Estep ably traces the whole history of Southern Baptist missions, starting with Adoniram and Ann Judson's work in Burma, understandably giving much weight to the personalities of the successive leaders. But he also traces structural developments, showing how the Board in the beginning almost *created* the Southern Baptist Convention as a denomination, via an *independent* mission board supported by the churches of the Convention (with an equally independent women's board) becoming the powerful and strongly centralised mission board of a centralised denomination (despite all the Baptist emphasis on the independence of the local church).

As such the Board became involved from 1979 onwards in the "conservative/progressive" conflict within the Southern Baptist denomination which led to the resignation of Keith Parks as President of the Foreign Mission Board in 1972, and to the formation of the Co-operative Baptist Fellowship as a competing foreign mission organisation for Southern Baptist churches, a development which so far has affected Europe much more than Africa. The author himself seems to try not to take sides too much in the controversy, as pages 384-388 show, where he equally endorses: institutions, preaching only, relief aid, and volunteers.

Written in these circumstances, the book tries to avoid extremes and to justify hope. Estep is convinced that, just as in the 19th century the FMB overcame the Landmark crisis (with its peculiar concept of church history), and the Gospel Missionary Movement in China (with its peculiar missiology), and did so by being firm *and* accepting genuine concern and devotion to Christ, it will also similarly recover from the results of the "conservative/progressive" controversy today. Currently the Board seems to be in the *firm* phase, thoroughly rethinking its principles and priorities and revamping its work on the mission fields accordingly. Presently the indigenous principle (assumed but never clearly defined in this book) is being given a new meaning through the policy of "nationalisation" (not explicitly mentioned in the book), a policy not demanded by the "nations", which leads to the shedding of all institutions by the mission, so that it can concentrate purely on evangelism, with high priority of reaching the unreached people groups. Although these developments took place after the book was written, the book can help greatly in understanding the new policies. For example, even if one does not like the changes, it can help in understanding the background for those changes to have the clarification that for the Southern Baptist Mission the [American] "mission" and the [national] "church" must remain eternally separate.

While the book can be of help to those who in any way co-operate with the Southern Baptists, it is also for missiologists an important book for learning about mission administration, and mission strategies and changes therein. Over the last decades the Southern Baptists kept the full emphasis on career missionaries, but combined this with a strong emphasis on "journeymen" (inclusive of women) missionaries, who serve a few years and use only English (p. 309), and "volunteers", who serve for four months to a year or two. These programmes are considered a great success, but the issue is not resolved how such missionary affluence (a four months' volunteer costs several thousands dollars) can be paired with the indigenous principles, on the strength of which the Baptist Mission has to refuse to buy a tin roof for a church (for a few hundred dollars, and something that can last many years).

Here the limitations of the book show: it is written for a jubilee, not to discuss missiology. That is left to the reader to do, but it is worthwhile doing so with the help of this book.

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