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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php

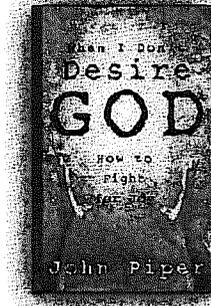


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BOOK REVIEWS



*A REPLY TO JOHN PIPER'S:
WHEN I DON'T DESIRE GOD: HOW TO
FIGHT FOR JOY*¹

Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway (2004)
272 pages, paper, \$12.99

During thirty years of ministry John Piper has found that “teaching and preaching about God’s demand that we delight ourselves in him more than in anything breaks and humbles people, and makes them desperate for true conversion and true Christianity” (31). Noting that joy results from faith (e.g., Philippians 1:25), Piper concludes, “the good fight of faith [1 Timothy 6:12] is [really] the fight for joy” (38). This explains the book’s subtitle, *How to Fight for Joy*. The book’s main title, *When I Don’t Desire God*, indicates its purpose is to explain what is involved in going from rebelling against God to worshiping him.

The path begins with God’s “unconscious influence he works in us to enable us to hear and welcome the Word” (98). At that point we are “justifi[ed] by faith alone because only faith receives the declaration that the ungodly is counted righteous” (84).

When that is settled—and it is settled in the twinkling of an eye—then the moral progress goes forward (sanctification). . . . Sanctification is [also] by faith alone because only faith receives the power to bear the fruit of love (84). In union with Christ two things happen: His righteousness is imputed to us, and,

because of that, a new impulse is given to become [the godly people] . . . we are [reckoned to be in justification]. The great gospel weapon in the fight for joy is the rock-solid reality that we are counted righteous in Christ by faith alone . . . because of his performance alone, not ours [justification]. . . . Our all-too-slow growth in Christ-likeness [sanctification] . . . is the necessary evidence that our faith is real. (85)

This *real* faith is “trusting Jesus not only as our all-sovereign Lord and all-sufficient Savior, but also as our all-surpassing Treasure.”

Saving faith involves no less than being glad to have Jesus himself for who he is. . . . If Christ is to be glorified in his people, their following [him] must be rooted not mainly in his promised gifts or threatened punishments, but in his glorious Person. . . . [The works of the Lord] will become idols . . . unless they point us to the Lord . . . and [we savor his] glory in all his works, especially the Gospel. (36)

But “today in the Western church our joy [in the person of Christ] is so fragile” because there is little understanding that “eternal life is laid hold of only by a persevering fight for the joy of faith” (37). “People do not really believe that anything significant is at stake in the fight for joy—least of all their eternal life” (38). “The stakes are so high we should not be surprised that we must . . . take up arms and fight for joy in God. A manual in that war is what this book aims to be” (40).

One must understand that “our fight for joy . . . puts us in the path where he [God] has ordained the blessing to come” (42), according to this manual, and this means letting the Word of Christ dwell in one richly (Colossians 3:16). One should follow a plan for reading through the Bible, two or three portions at a time, and prayerfully meditating on them. Memorizing some Bible verses suited for a quick response in fighting against temptation and discouragement is also vital for this path. Thus we “we welcome Jesus into our lives and make room for him to live, not as a silent guest with

no opinions or commands, but as an authoritative guest whose words and priorities and principles and promises matter more to us than anything does” (107). Piper says he believes “in the power of the indwelling Word of God to solve a thousand problems before they happen, and to heal a thousand wounds after they happen, and to kill a thousand sins in the moment of temptation” (123).

But we win victories in this fight to experience joy in God only by his grace and not by our efforts in using the Word of God to do this. In Piper’s view, God’s joy comes into one’s soul spontaneously and unexpectedly. Hence the enjoyment of this blessing cannot be traced back to any particular set of efforts to obey God in fighting for joy. “*When and how* [God’s blessings] come is God’s to decide, not ours. . . . In this way joy remains a gift, while we work patiently in the field of obedience and fight against the weeds and the crows and the rodents” (43, italics mine). Our joy “is not a wage God must pay for our work or for our fight” (42).

Piper is greatly concerned to exclude the legalism of thinking that people earn the blessing of being filled with God’s joy by how hard they fight for it. He argues that the unpredictability as to just when God will impart joy transforms that blessing from being a deserved recompense or reward for our obedience into a work of God’s unconditional grace. But Piper’s logic is flawed here. If the many promises of blessings attached to the Bible’s urgings be viewed as wages for services rendered, then no uncertainty as to the time of payment can change them into a gratuity.

For many years Piper’s way of excluding legalism in urging compliance with God’s commands was to view them as “laws of faith” (Romans 9:32), as prescriptions the wise and loving Doctor gives believers to show them “how to live the Christian life without being a legalist.”² These commands are never job descriptions, since God is “not served by human hands as though he needed anything” (Acts 17:25). Presumably by oversight, the third edition of *Desiring God* (2003) still has Piper saying, “Patients do not serve their physicians. They trust them for good prescriptions. The Sermon on the Mount

and the Ten Commandments are the Doctor's prescribed health regimen, not the employee's job description."³ So patients follow the steps of God's health regimen, not to obligate him to pay them a wage, but just for his blessings of satisfying heart thirst and general well being. In doing these things, "just for their health," people are working for their own benefit and so are not regarded as doing anything heroic. Neither are they rendering God a needed service obligating a recompense from him. According to Romans 3:27, a law of faith excludes boasting. The all-wise and loving Doctor gets all the praise and credit for prescribing for us the sorts of behavior leading to the ultimate blessing of sharing with God in drinking of the river of his pleasures (Psalm 36:8). But three years earlier Piper made it clear that he no longer found this "law of faith" concept useful in solving the problem of legalism.

On May 10, 2000, Piper distributed a five-page position paper entitled, "What Does It Mean that Israel Did Not 'Attain the Law' because She Pursued It 'Not by Faith but as Though It Were by Works'?" In a box on its first page Piper affirmed, albeit with a triple negative, that "Romans 9:32a does *not* teach that there is no short-term aim of the law that may be suitably described as 'not of faith' as in Galatians 3:12 [according to his interpretation of this verse]." But Piper's desire to avoid legalism in urging compliance with God's laws has remained as strong as ever. One way he now tries to do this lies in his problematic argument, considered a few paragraphs earlier, that to receive God's joy unexpectedly is to receive this blessing as a gracious gift.

It is also lies behind a statement appearing at the beginning of chapter 10 in this manual on how to fight for joy: "I hope that these thoughts will feel like empowering encouragements rather than confining prescriptions" (155). How Piper handles the exhortations in 1 Thessalonians 5:14–18 provides an example of what he means. In that passage, Paul urges Christian leaders "to admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. . . ." And it concludes by saying, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing,

and give thanks in all circumstances." Apparently each of these urgings is a "confining prescription." But in prayerfully meditating on these commands, one realizes that circumstances themselves can never provide an adequate basis for always rejoicing and being thankful. But the solution to this problem is tied in with the command to "pray without ceasing." This implies that one should "lean on God all the time for the miracle of joy in your life" (157). Such a leaning-on-God-command supplies the "empowering encouragement" for obeying this "string of commands" (155). This seems to be a second way Piper now has for avoiding legalism in handling all God's urgings now viewed as "confining prescriptions."

And Piper's handling of Paul's description of the work of ministry in 2 Timothy 2:24–26 may be still another way that helps him avoid legalism now that he can no longer talk of God's urgings as "laws of faith." In this passage Paul described a minister's task as being an apt teacher, forbearing in gently and patiently correcting (*paideia*) unsubmitive people with kindness and patience. So the work of ministry must not only teach doctrine but also keep drawing on the Bible's vast array of urgings with regard to correct behavior. Then "God may perhaps grant them repentance unto a knowledge of the truth, so they will escape from the snare of the devil after being captured by him to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:25b–26).

But Piper characterizes "the knowledge of the truth" that delivers from the devil's snare simply as "Bible teaching." In answer to the question, "Teaching what?" he replies, "Knowledge of the truth" [verse 26]—the Word of God" (112). "Good, solid Bible teaching is a crucial part of deliverance from the darkening power of the devil" (225). But Piper makes no explicit mention in any of the places where he cites 2 Timothy 2:24–26 of the "other part" God also wants used as the means to effect the miracle of conversion.

In a sermon on Romans 7:4, preached on February 25, 2001, Piper has a paragraph that lowers somewhat the Bible's ethical instructions: "The key to living the Christian life—the key to bearing fruit for God—the key to a Christ-exalting life

of love and sacrifice—is to die to the law and be joined *not* to a list of rules, *but* to a Person, to the risen Christ.” Piper then likened this blessing to getting into a house filled with treasure and having a front door and a back door. The Bible’s many laws are the combination for opening the large padlock on the front door.

Right turn, don’t kill; left turn, don’t steal; right turn, don’t lie; left turn, don’t commit adultery; right turn, don’t covet; and so on. But Paul says, if you want to get into that house—if you want the treasure of love—you must die to the law as the door to the house and be joined to Christ who picks you up, takes you to the back door, and carries you in. You can only get in by trusting him and riding in him. You must be united to him if you would get into the treasure of love. In him and by him you bear the fruit of love and fulfill the law.

Piper is correct in saying, “in the end, no human means make the miracle of repentance happen” (51) so that one gets into this treasure house. But is it not arrogance to emphasize Bible teaching and yet say nothing about the *paideia* as part of the means of grace God wants to use in performing the miracle of conversion? Just a few verses after 2 Timothy 2:24–26 Paul declares that it is the Bible’s divine inspiration that makes it the one book able to make people wise unto salvation (2 Timothy 3:15–17). This inspiration makes it profitable for “teaching, for rebuke, for correction, and for training [*paideia*] in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). So not only is the Bible’s doctrinal teaching essential for making a person wise unto salvation, but so is its ability to “rebuke” and “correct” all sorts of misbehavior, thus being profitable in “training” that suits and equips people for every good work (2 Timothy 3:17). This passage makes *paideia* as vital a part of the Bible as its doctrine. Omitting this part of a minister’s task obviously avoids legalism. But one hopes that Piper would not bypass so much biblical emphasis for this reason.

For about twenty years Piper used the “law of faith” concept to avoid legalism. And were he able to return to his earlier conviction, he could again see the entire Bible as setting

forth the “eternal gospel” (Revelation 14:4). He would surely preach the substitutionary atonement as the way God remains just in justifying sinners both before and after Christ’s finished work on the cross (Romans 3:25f.). But he could also explain how Noah and Abraham, who knew nothing of this material cause of their justification, were saved by the instrumental cause of it, in having a persevering trust and obedience in the Doctor’s prescriptions for their needs (Hebrews 11:7–8; Genesis 15:6). Then, like Paul, he could see his whole ministry as simply urging an obedience of faith (Romans 1:5; 15:8; 16:26) and he could make “repentance” an explicit part of this urging (Acts 20:21; 26:18, 20).

In 1 Corinthians 7:19, Paul said, “For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything but keeping the commandments of God [counts for everything].” In so speaking Paul put keeping the commandments of God, understood as laws of faith, in the exalted category of the “everything,” just as he did for “faith working itself out in love” (Galatians 5:6) and for “the new creation” (Galatians 6:15). And Piper should certainly allow “the commandments of God” to occupy the same exalted place. Piper should elevate God’s commandments again to their proper place alongside the “new creation” and “faith working itself out in love” and also part of the “everything.” And if Piper were to remove the “disconnect” in this book between faith and joy and see the two as going hand in hand (Romans 15:13; Philippians 1:26; 1 Peter 1:8), maybe more people would be encouraged thus to entrust their lives to God and start on the road to being “complete and equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17).

Author

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and *Easter Faith and History* (1965). Dr. Fuller is a widely published author in journals and periodicals. Dr. Fuller was Dr. John Piper's professor in seminary. He is the father of four children and six grandchildren.

Notes

1. John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2004), 268 pages.
2. John Piper, *Desiring God* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1986), 231. Quoting from Daniel Fuller, *Gospel and Law—Contrast or Continuum?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 117ff.
3. John Piper, *Desiring God*, 3rd ed. (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 2003), 171.

Note: This review is a revised version of a book review paper read at a seminar at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 14, 2005.



**ISLAM IN CONTEXT:
PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**
Peter G. Riddell and Peter Cotterell
Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic
(2003)
231 pages, paper, \$17.99

Over the years, I have read many books on Islam (both in Arabic and in English) and reviewed quite a few. There is something very special about *Islam in Context: Past, Present, and Future*. Once you begin reading it, you are gripped by the relevance and timeliness of the historical facts the authors relate and explain. This is not just another book on the history of Islam; it is a serious attempt to make sense out of an extremely difficult and complex subject that touches our daily lives.

In their introduction, Riddell and Cotterell set the tone for their work by taking exception to the widely circulated and simplistic view that sees the West as primarily responsible for

the unrest that grips many parts of the Islamic world. "In our view it is not the non-Muslim world that stands at the crossroads, but the Muslim world. Islam has, throughout its history, contained within itself a channel of violence, legitimized by certain passages of the Qur'an, though put in question by other passages" (7).

LOOKING BACK

Part one of *Islam in Context* is titled, "Looking Back." After we learn about the life and accomplishments of Muhammad, we discover that his death, in June 632, ushered in the new order of the *caliphate*. Since the Prophet was considered Allah's final messenger to mankind, a caliph (successor) could have only a limited role, to serve as both a political and a spiritual leader of the Muslim Umma (community) in Madina. As Muhammad left no instructions for an orderly transfer of leadership, this gave rise to many divisions in Islam that have plagued it ever since.

Muslims are unanimous in regarding their early years as constituting the Golden Age. The first four caliphs are honored by the title *al-Rashidoon*, the "Rightly-guided." The details related in the book about this phase of Islamic history are extremely important for a proper understanding of Islam, then and now. The first caliph, Abu Bakr, lived only two years. But due to his foresight, Muslims began collecting the "utterances or pronouncements of Muhammad that would eventually constitute the Qur'an" (35).

During Umar's and Uthman's caliphates, Islam spread militarily from Arabia into the Middle East and beyond, making it unique among the world religions by joining faith and politics into one inseparable entity. The fourth caliph, Ali, was a cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad. He did not receive the unanimous support of the leaders of the Muslim community in Madina. His assassination in 661 marked the end of the religious and political unity of Islam. From then on, Islam followed many roads: Sunni, Shi'ite, Khariji, and Sufi. Commenting on the tumultuous events that took place in this period, our authors observe:

Islam had now advanced far beyond the boundaries of the Arabian Peninsula, but while it entered the period of the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs along a single broad road, the rule of Ali and especially that of Al-Husain brought Islam to crossroads, which it left along different routes. The main highway was taken by the Sunnis. A lesser road, though not without its significance, was taken by the Shi'a. Along a third road, scarcely discernible as a road, traveled the Khariji. The Sufis, being adaptable, trod either the Sunni or the Shi'a road, though not the Khariji road. The Muslim travelers carried with them their Qur'an and would soon add to that the Traditions. Further along their respective routes, they all would encounter the philosopher-theologians, the mu'tazila, who would question not a few of the philosophical assumptions carried along so far without question by the Muslim peoples. (44)

IN BETWEEN: THE EBB AND FLOW OF EMPIRE

Part two deals with "In Between: The Ebb and Flow of Empire." Every historian writing on Islam faces this serious question: "Are there reliable documents that date from the early history of Islam?" In answer to such a query, Riddell and Cotterell remark: "The bulk of our historical texts on early Islam are to be found in a body of compilations and digests composed roughly between 850 and 950 AD" (83).

This observation implies that, with the exception of the compilation of the Qur'an, all written documents that deal with the history of the Prophet (570-632), the period of the "Rightly Guided caliphs" (632-661), as well as those of the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750) date from several centuries later. Furthermore, they could not have been composed without some redactions that were colored by the specific historiography of the Abbasids, the Umayyads' successors.

The Abbasid period lasted for several centuries and was centered in Baghdad. It witnessed the flowering of Islamic civilization. Arabic culture, the arts, and knowledge were much promoted. The peak of Abbasid glory occurred under Caliph Harun al-Rashid (786-809) and his son Al-Ma'mun (813-833). During this period Baghdad was a magnificent urban center.

Our authors do not hesitate to comment on some controversial issues such as the Crusades. It is customary nowadays for radical Muslims to look upon the West's present involvements in their world as a revival of the Crusades. From his hideout in the rugged mountains of Afghanistan, or Pakistan, Osama bin Laden inveighs against the "Salibis" (Crusaders) who have desecrated *Daru'l Islam*. Along with many contemporary Muslims, he is fully committed to the Islamic worldview that regards Islam's conquests of the Middle East and North Africa (which took place in predominantly Christian lands) as divinely sanctioned. They were called "*futuhah*," literally, "openings" or "liberations." But once a territory passed into *Daru'l Islam*, it must always remain Islamic. In other words, "*Conquista*" by Muslims is regarded as legitimate, but "*Reconquista*" by non-Muslims, is considered illegitimate! To this very day, Arabic poetry continues to lament the fall of Granada (1492) and the end of seven centuries of Islamic presence in Andalusia (Spain). Reflecting on this topic, the authors comment:

[The Crusades] represented the response of the Christian world to the earlier Islamic expansion and to the loss of the Byzantine territories in the Middle East and North Africa. They do, of course, raise substantial moral issues, but consideration of these should not be divorced from the historical context. If apologies are to be extended, it is important that this be done in a framework of mutual acknowledgment of error and excesses, and shared repentance. (102)

The very title of the book (*Islam in Context*) reminds us of the importance of considering the *context* of all the historical events throughout the course of history. For example, Martin Luther began the Reformation in 1517. This is a well-known fact. It is, however, doubtful that many Christians are aware that, at that very time, the advancing armies of Islam were threatening Europe. In the early days of the Reformation, Budapest fell to the invading Turks who then dominated Hungary for the next 150 years. And in 1529, the first siege of

Vienna by the Ottoman Turks occurred! Personally, I do not recall being made aware of that larger context, which surrounded the Reformation, while studying church history in the United States of America (1950–53)!

The history and details of recent conflicts and the birth of the state of Israel are described in chapter 9. We are given a concise account of the tortuous history of that period between 1948 and the beginning of the Third Millennium. At the conclusion of part two, we find the following comments:

Parts 1 and 2 of this book have focused on history. We have seen that the history of Islam is one of greatness and decline, of empires and occupation. There have been recurring flashpoints between Islam and Christianity through the centuries.

In addition to the tension and rivalry between Islam and its fellow monotheistic faiths, the internal history of Islam itself has suffered from periods of great fragmentation and rivalry between competing groups. For the first 1,350 years of its existence, Islam has had to negotiate its way through a series of internal crossroads, where different ideologies competed to define the identity of the faith. Such rivalries were periodically resolved, only to resurface in other forms at later points in Islamic history.

We will now turn our attention to the modern day, keeping in mind aspects of history that have left a clear imprint on events unfurling around us at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and considering how internal tensions are playing themselves out as different Islamic groups vie to define the identity of the faith in the new millennium. (145–46)

THE MUSLIM MASSES, WORLDVIEW, AND RESPONSES TO TERRORISM

In part three of *Islam in Context*, the following subjects are considered: "The Muslim Masses and Westphobia," "The

Radical Islamist Worldview," "The Moderate Worldview," "Responses to Terrorism," and ending with "Conclusions."

Because of 9/11/01 (USA) and 3/11/04 (Spain,) part three assumes a special importance. The authors return to deal with the views of some Western "experts" who insist that it was American policies that were to blame for the present unsettled situation in the Muslim world. As Osama bin Laden summarized the Arab-Muslim grievances: "The storm will not calm as long as you [the United States and Britain] do not end your support for the Jews in Palestine, lift your embargo from around the Iraqi people, and have left the Arabian Peninsula" (153).

However, those critics gloss over the existence of a virulent animus against all things Western (perceived in the Muslim mind as Christian), and which have strong roots in both the texts of Islam and its long history of confrontation with Christendom. We must not omit from our consideration of the causes for Westphobia among the Muslim masses the role played by the sacred and authoritative texts of Islam (Qur'an and Hadith).

Islamic sacred scriptures, the Qur'an and Prophetic Traditions (Hadith), include a vast array of verses that serve to mold Muslims' views toward non-Muslims. Throughout the Muslim world, an important part of the educational formation of young children includes study of the scriptures. In this way, from an early age Muslim children's views toward non-Muslims, both conscious and unconscious, are fashioned by their encounter with the Muslim sacred texts. (156)

Chapter 11 deals with "The Radical Islamic Worldview." It describes the "mind-set and motives" of the radical Islamists who are bent on the destruction of the present world-order and on replacing it with a purely Islamic one. Quotations are gathered from various sources such as the Egyptian semi-official *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, *Al-Jazeera TV of Qatar*, *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *The Washington Post*, as well as various sources available on the Internet.

It is important to remind ourselves that radical Islamists would not immediately embrace the West if the modern issues were quickly resolved: that is if suddenly Israel were dismantled, Iraqi sanctions were dropped, and U.S. troops withdrew from Arabia. If these three steps were taken, Muslim radicals would find other causes for complaint because in essence—and this is the key point—their particular literalist reading of Islamic scripture leads them to conclude that non-believers (non-Muslims) are infidels and should be fought. The issues of Israel, Iraq, and U.S. military bases—plus other struggles such as those in Chechnya and Kashmir—are merely manifestations of the radicals' conflict with the West, rather than its causes. (166, 168)

In chapter 12, the authors deal with a very important subject: the "Moderate [Islamic] Worldview." It must be noted that a history of a moderate strain within Islam goes back to the ninth century. The Mu'tazila in Baghdad did their utmost to elaborate what may be called a moderate Islamic worldview. They criticized the currently accepted doctrine of Predestination as incompatible with the justice of God. Furthermore, they tackled head-on the claim of Orthodox Muslims that the Qur'an had existed from all eternity. The Mu'tazila's attachment to the doctrine of *tawheed* (unity of Allah) demanded a Qur'an that was temporal.

Unfortunately, the Mu'tazila, being children of their times, demanded and received the cooperation of several caliphs in enforcing their views. For example, they were instrumental in the persecution of Imam Hanbal, a famous legal scholar, and a founder of one of the four recognized schools for the interpretation and implementation of the Shari'a.

After his release from his incarceration, Imam Hanbal's views became dominant in Sunni Islam. Centuries later, his strict jurisprudence became the inspiration for the rise of the Wahhabi movement in Arabia. It is the preferred interpretation of Islam in Saudi Arabia, and among the radical Islamists such as Hizbullah (Lebanon), Hamas (West Bank and Gaza), and al-Qaeda.

Over the years, I became interested in the study of the

works of certain modernizing Muslims who called for *tajdid* (renewal) and *tahdith* (modernization). I was especially attracted by the writings of Dr. Zaki Naguib Mahmoud, an Egyptian scholar who worked hard to bring about both *tajdid* and *tahdith*. Unfortunately, following his death in 1990, I am not aware of any Arabic-speaking scholar that has continued his work. However, I would be remiss if I failed to mention the works and testimonies of such men as Kanan Makiya (an Iraqi exile) of Harvard, Fuad Ajami (a Lebanese) of Johns Hopkins University, and Amir Taheri (an Iranian journalist living in Paris, who was on a lecture tour in the USA in March 2004). They all advocate a moderate Muslim worldview that will enable contemporary Islam to cope with modernity and to coexist with the rest of the world.

In commenting on this subject, Riddell and Cotterell remark:

In effect, there is a titanic struggle taking place between moderates and radicals for the hearts and minds of the Muslim masses in the middle. Who is winning? It is too early to say, but there are certain pointers that provide an indication of what is happening among the Muslim masses. Salman Rushdie, in a letter to the New York Times, sounds a note of warning: "Paranoid Islam, which blames outsiders, 'infidels,' for all the ills of Muslim societies, and whose proposed remedy is the closing of those societies to the revival project of modernity, is presently the fastest growing version of Islam in the world." (193)

Chapter 13 deals with the urgent topic of "Responses to Terrorism." In a sense, it could be lifted out of the book and made into a tract for distribution far and wide. Riddell and Cotterell approach this subject by calling for a new Qur'anic hermeneutic where "the *meaning* of a text must be determined by reference to the wording of the text, the related text around it, and the historical context within which the text was produced" (206).

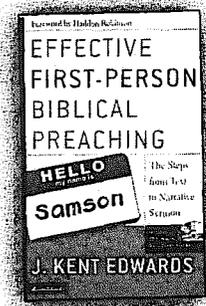
I find these words extremely important and helpful. If only they would be taken to heart by some responsible moderate

Muslim scholars who happen to live in the West, and who would be ready to interact with the irenic attitude of our authors. For not until a neo-Mu'tazila movement arises within Islam and calls for a non-literalistic hermeneutic of the Qur'an and the Hadith, can we expect Westophobia and the violence that it engenders to disappear.

Meanwhile, the bad news keeps coming; and the list of the geographical areas that have been impacted by Islamic terrorism gets longer: Beirut, Mogadishu, Nairobi, Dar-el-Salaam, New York, Washington, Moscow, Bali, and Madrid. And as I was finishing typing this review on my computer, I heard about another terrorist attack: this time in Uzbekistan, Central Asia!

I owe a special word of thanks to the authors of this timely book. My gratitude goes also to Baker Academic, a Division of Baker Book House, for their efforts in making this work available to the public in such an attractive form. I trust it will have a wide circulation and undergo many reprints in the future.

BASSAM MADANY
Middle Eastern Resources
South Holland, Illinois



EFFECTIVE FIRST-PERSON BIBLICAL PREACHING: THE STEPS FROM NARRATIVE TO SERMON

J. Kent Edwards
Grand Rapids: Zondervan (2005)
190 pages, cloth, \$24.99

We live in a culture obviously fascinated with stories. Stories permeate our lives through the news, television, movies, and DVDs. Our schools also place an increasingly prominent emphasis upon children reading stories, and parents reading stories to their children. Yes, we are living in a culture deeply fascinated with story.

A significant portion of the Bible contains story as well, or what we call narrative literature. J. Kent Edwards believes we should acknowledge this fact and preach in the light of it. His *Effective First-Person Biblical Preaching* provides a solid opportunity for the preacher to capitalize upon a culturally relevant way to faithfully communicate the biblical text to modern culture.

Edwards provides cultural, educational, theological, and emotional reasons for why a preacher should give first-person sermons. He defines a first-person sermon as one that

communicates the idea of a biblical passage through a character with personal knowledge of the events in the passage. Preachers take on the personality of this character and reexperience the events of the biblical text in order to recommunicate what the original author communicated to the first recipients of the biblical narrative. (13)

Edwards' cultural and theological reasons for this kind of preaching are fairly obvious. Add to this his educational and emotional reasons for this approach and you have here both fascinating and relevant material for the preacher. I appreciated his application of educational learning styles to his subject as well, since these are often overlooked by those of us who do not share particular learning traits. The emotional aspect of Edwards' argument is actually reminiscent of that employed by the Puritans, who also clearly saw the need to preach to the whole person.

In chapters two through four, Edwards introduces the steps of the exegetical task that should be followed specifically in narrative biblical literature. He writes: "It may surprise you that there is no one-size-fits-all exegetical methodology. Many of us came out of seminary with an assumption that what works for epistles will work anywhere. It won't. Here you will need to use a new exegetical key—one cut in the shape of a narrative."

Most preachers will be familiar with a great deal of what Edwards writes in these early chapters, but they may not be able to organize their own insights in a concise and

understandable order as done here. Though Edwards writes to a post-seminary audience, the person with only a Bible college education can easily follow him. Even though much of the information he gives might be redundant to post-seminarians, it still serves as a refreshing reminder for the exegetical task. Story context, structure, character analysis, setting, the "big idea" of the narrative, and application all fill out these helpful chapters with both familiar and new ideas.

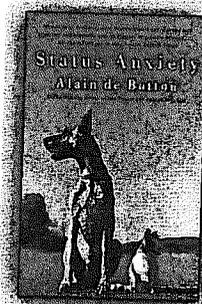
The actual homiletic task is covered in chapters five and six. This section begins with some redundancy, at least for readers of modern homiletical texts, since it looks at both text selection and re-identifying the "big idea" of the narrative. Edwards is concerned with the preacher's ability to identify the original author's intent *before* presenting a first-person sermon. He assumes that most persons who will read this book already know a good deal about the "big idea," since it has been taught by the well-known homiletician Haddon Robinson for some years and was more recently reinforced by the book, *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching: Connecting the Bible to People*, by Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson. I believe Edwards should actually have included more here on how someone discovers the "big idea" of the text, since this is so important for first-person sermons. Edwards provides the reader with a multitude of information on the preparation and presentation of first-person sermons and considers the identification of the protagonist and antagonist as crucial to the delivery of such sermons. He also includes a great deal of information on the necessity of understanding the setting, plot, perspective, and the filling in of important information on lesser characters. He even includes brief comments on props and costuming. Edwards advocates writing and rehearsing a manuscript of your sermon before the preaching event but urges that you preach the detailed story *without* notes. This aspect alone may present the greatest challenge to the typical preacher. I believe embracing and applying the "big idea" is *the key* to putting the preacher's mind at ease when presenting a first-person sermon.

In chapters seven and eight, Edwards answers a number of

practical questions. He presents many interesting alternatives to preaching a first-person sermon. There are several interesting ideas here that I wish he had explained further. Perhaps he will do this in a follow-up book. These alternatives would also be attractive to those who are frightened by what appears to be an overwhelming amount of preparation needed to present an effective first-person sermon.

The two appendices contain examples of narrative preaching and implementation worksheets that can be used for preparing first-person sermons. A video presentation by the author of an actual first person sermon on CD-ROM is also included. The sample sermons and video presentation are very helpful, especially to those who are unfamiliar with this type of sermon. Putting the implementation worksheets in the print section of the book alone, and not including them in files on the CD-ROM, was short sighted. I also wonder why all the sample first-person sermons included in the print text were not also included on the CD-ROM. In spite of these few shortcomings, this is a truly fine book that is concerned with communicating the biblical authors' original intent to our culture, a culture clearly fascinated by stories.

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STATUS ANXIETY
Alain de Botton
New York: Pantheon (2004)
320 pages, paper, \$13.95

Status refers to one's position in society. The higher one's status, the more one is valued in the eyes of the world. Though few care to admit it, high status is extremely desirable as "one of the finest of earthly goods" (vii).

"Status anxiety" is "[a] worry, so pernicious as to be capable of ruining extended stretches of our lives, that we are in danger of failing to conform to the ideals of success laid down by our society and that we may as a result be stripped of dignity and respect; a worry that we are currently occupying too modest a rung or about to fall to a lower one" (vii–viii). The main reason we long for a top position on the social ladder "is because our self-conception is so dependent upon what others make of us" (viii).

In his book *Status Anxiety*, Alain de Botton argues that every adult life is "defined by two great love stories": the quest for sexual love and the quest for social love—love from the world. The first quest is "well known and well charted"; the second "is a more secret and shameful tale" (5).

We all want to be "somebodies" rather than "nobodies." We long to be respected and listened to. Why do we desire these things? "Because we are afflicted by a congenital uncertainty as to our own value, as a result of which affliction we tend to allow others' appraisals to play a determining role in how we see ourselves" (8). Our personal awareness of our inner weaknesses and contradictions makes us susceptible to others' appraisal. "We discern evidence of both cleverness and stupidity, humour and dullness, importance and superfluity. And amid such uncertainty, we typically turn to the wider world to settle the question of our significance. . . . We seem beholden to the affects of others to endure ourselves" (9). When others approve of our lives and consider us successful, important, and bright, we feel worthy, significant, and intelligent. But in the absence of others' approval, however, we are left feeling disgraced, insignificant, and stupid.

For most of human history, status has been fixed at birth. In the eighteenth century, with the rise of political and social equality, status became more fluid. "In a stroke, [the War for Independence] transformed American society from a hereditary, aristocratic hierarchy . . . into a dynamic economy in which status was awarded in direct proportion to the (largely financial) achievements of each new generation" (31).

Prior to this change, a person's societal status did not

bring shame. For example: "The serf considered his inferiority as an effect of the immutable order of nature. Consequently, a sort of goodwill was established between classes so differently favoured by fortune. One found inequality in society, but men's souls were not degraded thereby" (34). Because of this, people were preserved from status anxiety. Uncritical acceptance of the beliefs communicated in three ancient cultural stories formed the basis for people's tolerance of their lowly status.

FIRST STORY: *The poor are not responsible for their condition and are the most useful in society.*

Status is not due to merit but birth or divine order. Without the poor the world would collapse, for they fulfilled the most important functions in society (47–49).

SECOND STORY: *Low status has no moral connotation.*

"The New Testament demonstrated that neither wealth nor poverty was an accurate index of moral worth. After all, Jesus was the highest man, the most blessed, and yet on earth he had been poor, ruling out any simple equation between righteousness and riches" (50). Furthermore, the New Testament "witnessed the rich failing to fit through the eyes of needles" and encouraged the poor "that they would inherit the earth and were assured that they would be among the first through the gates of the Heavenly Kingdom" (51).

THIRD STORY: *The rich are sinful and corrupt and owe their wealth to their robbery of the poor.*

It was assumed that the rich gained their wealth primarily through oppression and exploitation.

In the middle of the eighteenth century these three cultural stories were replaced by three new stories. This radically changed beliefs and expectations concerning status and introduced "status anxiety" to the new world.

FIRST STORY: *The rich are the useful ones, not the poor.*

"[C]ontrary to centuries of economic thinking, it was the rich who in fact contributed the most to society, insofar as their spending provided employment for everyone below them and so helped the weakest to survive" (56). Pursuing and attaining great wealth was of greater utility to society than hard and patient labor. "The villains of economic theory since the early days of Christianity . . . now found themselves recast as its heroes" (58). The wealthy now fulfilled the most important functions in society.

SECOND STORY: *Status does have moral connotations.*

Formerly, "a person's place in the social hierarchy was not reflective of his or her actual qualities" (59). Now, in light of so-called "equal opportunities" for all people, status was a reward of merit, primarily financial achievement. With everyone guaranteed an equal and fair chance of success, people would be rewarded according to their worth—or so it was assumed. The successful merited their success; conversely, the failures merited their failure. "Low status came to seem not merely regrettable but also *deserved*" (67).

THIRD STORY: *The poor are sinful and corrupt and owe their poverty to their own stupidity.*

"With the rise of the economic meritocracy, the poor moved, in some quarters, from being termed 'unfortunate,' and seen as the fitting object of the charity and guilt of the rich, to being described as 'failures' and regarded as fair targets for the contempt of robust, self-made individuals" (67). In a land of equal opportunity, the rich were not simply lucky, they were better.

Because of this radical change in cultural beliefs, status is now assigned differently than in any previous period in human history: "A successful person may be a man or a woman, of any race, who has been able to accumulate money, power and renown through his or her own accomplishments (rather than through inheritance) in one of the myriad sectors of the commercial world (including sport, art and scientific

research)" (181). This way of reckoning status may seem natural to us, but it is "only the work of humans, a recent development dating from the middle of the eighteenth century" (182).

Status is no longer considered to be the natural product of one's family of birth or good fortune. Now status is the result of one's own efforts, achievements, and acquirements. Therefore, status is not as secure as it formerly was in the ancient world.

In traditional societies, high status may have been inordinately hard to acquire, but it was also comfortingly hard to lose. It was as difficult to stop being a lord as, more darkly, it was to cease being a peasant. What matters was one's identity at birth, rather than anything one might achieve in one's lifetime through the exercise of one's faculties. What mattered was who one was, seldom what one did.

The great aspiration of modern societies has been to reverse this equation, to strip away both inherited privilege and inherited under-privilege in order to make rank dependent on individual achievement—which has come primarily to mean financial achievement. (87)

This great cultural reversal has fueled the desire to succeed and remain successful at any cost. More than ever before, people are pressured to hide their failures, exaggerate their successes, manage their images, maintain high profit margins, and create ever new and better products.

This feverish attempt to achieve and maintain status is fueled and sustained by status anxiety. After all, what will people think of us if we fail?

Our fear of failing at various tasks would likely be much less were it not for our awareness of how harshly failure tends to be viewed and interpreted by others. Fear of the material consequences of failure is thus compounded by fear of the unsympathetic attitude of the world towards those who have failed,

exemplified by its haunting proclivity to refer to them as "losers"—a word callously signifying both that they have lost and that they have, at the same time, forfeited any right to sympathy for losing. (147)

Many of de Botton's remedies to counter and contain status anxiety are helpful correctives. Most of them are compatible with the Christian faith and message. Throughout the entire book, Jesus (along with Socrates) is offered as one of the rare individuals who effectively renounced status anxiety (viii). Also, Christianity is presented as a religion that possesses the necessary tools to oppose status anxiety (247–51).

Though we should not dismiss people's perspectives altogether, we should not be overly controlled by others' perceptions of us. We must implicitly refute the suggestion "that what others think of us must determine what we may think of ourselves, and that every insult, whether accurate or not, must shame us" (112).

We must be more concerned about who we really are rather than who we seem to be to others. "Philosophers have recommended that we follow the internal markers of our conscience rather than any external signs of approval or condemnation. What matters is not what we *seem* to be to a random group but what we ourselves *know* we are" (120).

How limiting it is to morally judge people on the basis of salary, wealth, and possessions. We should not judge others or ourselves by this standard. True wealth is not ultimately found in possessing things but in possessing "a noble soul." "A man may have a great suite of attendants, a beautiful palace, great influence and a large income. All that may *surround* him, but it is not *in* him" (188).

In order to counter status anxiety, we must adjust our expectations. Every failure does not have to shame us. "We are not always humiliated by failing at things . . . we are humiliated only if we invest our pride and sense of worth in a given aspiration or achievement and then are disappointed in our pursuit of it. Our goals dictate what we will interpret as a triumph and what must count as a catastrophe" (35).

Adjusting our expectations can go a long way to increasing the amount of personal happiness we experience in life: "What we understand to be normal is critical in determining our chances of happiness" (36); "We may be happy enough with little if little is what we have come to expect, and we may be miserable with much when we have been taught to desire everything" (43–44).

Our obsession with the lives of the rich and famous may impact our contentment with our own lives. Alain believes that the "atmosphere of the press" goes a long way towards increasing status anxiety. He invites us to consider "how greatly the levels of status anxiety of the population might diminish if only our own newspapers were to exchange a fraction of their interest in Lady Agnes Duff and her successors for a focus on the significance of ordinary life" (79–80).

Alain points out how a belief in eternal life puts this life in perspective and thus effectively strikes a blow against status anxiety:

But when a belief in an afterlife is dismissed as a childish and scientifically impossible opiate, the pressure to succeed and find fulfillment will inevitably be intensified by the awareness that one has only a single and frighteningly fleeting opportunity to do so. In such a context, earthly achievements can no longer be seen as an overture to what one may realize in another world; rather, they are the sum total of all that one will ever amount to. (37)

There is much of value in de Botton's book. He clearly demonstrates how contemporary evaluations of status are primarily social inventions. Without this clear perspective church leaders and church people can easily fall prey to status anxiety in relationship to everything from personal lifestyles to matters of church size. Could it be that the "success" and "relevance" we so desperately crave might simply be a capitulation to passing societal evaluations rather than related to God's purpose? The answer to this question is not easy, but perhaps asking the question in the first place is a good first

step in the right direction. How tragic it would be to look back on life and recognize that everything we have ever done has been motivated by the desire to appear important in the eyes of others, rather than by the desire to please God and love others.

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