

## Book reviews



### Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in *The Lord of the Rings*

Matthew Dickerson. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2003. 234 pp. ISBN 1587430851. US\$14.95.

One consequence of the hype surrounding Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies has been an explosion in the production of secondary literature on Tolkien. Extending far beyond the hordes of officially licensed movie tie-in books, it includes an array of scholarly, semi-scholarly and popularist publications tracing Tolkien's sources, delineating his worldview, and reflecting on his influence. Some of these are very good (notably, Tom Shippey's *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*), while others seem largely interested in making a quick buck.

Given Tolkien's deep-rooted Christian faith, it's unsurprising that Christian writers have contributed significantly to this literary outpouring, though they are generally more interested in deriving spiritual than financial capital from the endeavour. Matthew Dickerson's *Following Gandalf* is a representative example. Eager to claim the success of Tolkien's fiction for Christianity, Dickerson's book unpacks the assumptions underlying *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion* and *The Hobbit*, and explains their consonance with a Christian theology. Initially, Dickerson's explanation is somewhat guarded, but by the book's end, he unhesitatingly declares Tolkien's work to be an indelibly Christian myth.

There is nothing particularly novel about this claim, and Dickerson does a reasonable, if somewhat laborious, job of justifying it. Examining particularly

the motivations of Tolkien's characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, Dickerson concludes that the novel's vindication of free will, selflessness, and moral responsibility flow necessarily from the Christian beliefs of its author. These conclusions seem sound, and *Following Gandalf* provides a useful summary for anyone new to the issues. Still, Dickerson says little that a thoughtful reader, familiar with the outlines of Christian theology, would be unable to discern for herself, which raises various questions about his method and intended audience. So determined is he to quarry moral absolutes and theological principles from *The Lord of the Rings* (eg: pp 60, 76) that Dickerson ends up treating the book more as a moral textbook than a novel. Tolkien himself insisted that his prime motivation in writing *The Lord of the Rings* was to

*...try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them...* ("Foreword", p. 10).

While Dickerson quotes this passage towards the end of his book (p. 203), he struggles to accept its full implications. Art, as the musician T-Bone Burnett argues, must be "irresistible". Anything that aims to instruct or inform or teach people is "resistible", and therefore "not art". If Burnett's analysis is applied to *The Lord of the Rings*, it suggests that the book is profoundly Christian because Tolkien's imagination was thoroughly baptised, not because he set out to write a join-the-dots introduction to Christian theology.

In places, Dickerson's didacticism also presumes theological simplicities that Tolkien avoids. For example, he reads a dualism into Tolkien's work which

sees "our spiritual nature" as "infinitely more important" than the physical (p. 149), neatly eliding the inextricability of the two throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. Eowyn and Merry combine to kill the Lord of the Nazgul with swords and shields; Sam piggybacks Frodo up Mt. Doom to destroy the Ring. Dickerson should know this, for he rightly stresses that Gandalf's prime role is to encourage the people of Middle Earth in fighting evil, rather than using his own supernatural power to blast it (pp. 135-136; 230-233). Yet despite this insight, Dickerson still separates "bodily salvation" from "spiritual salvation" (150), a separation ultimately unthinkable to anyone who takes the resurrection of the body seriously. Again, Dickerson seems not to realise the full implications here of something he quotes from Tolkien, to the effect that a doctrine of redemption still requires work "with mind as well as body" ("On Fairy Stories", quoted p. 233, emphasis added).

In the final analysis, my quarrel with Dickerson may be more about nuance than substance. At times, he is very helpful, such as when he contrasts Tolkien's treatment of free will against the determinist materialism of Bertrand Russell and others (p. 84, 112-113, 117-118). His willingness to judge United States foreign policy in the light of Denethor's *realpolitik* is also refreshing (p. 73), while he offers

some interesting (if partial) reflections on whether Tolkien's writing glorifies war. Yet these insights are joined elsewhere by a boldness in drawing theological conclusions that belies the complexity of Tolkien's work. It troubles me, for example, that Dickerson so casually refers to God as "the Authority" (182ff), a label which he takes from a single Tolkien letter and which, since Philip Pullman, stands for everything oppressive and life-denying in Christian history. Likewise, he ascribes the sorrow permeating Tolkien's work solely to "the absence of Christ" in Middle Earth (215), an assertion that overlooks the sense of exile colouring a good deal of Christian literature, from Romans 8, through the Old English poem "The Seafarer", to the work of Tolkien himself.

Among other possible instances, a neat final example of Dickerson's cheerful reductionism comes in his quotation of the optimistic passage, central to Jackson's first movie, where Gandalf suggests to Frodo that he was "meant" to have the Ring, which "may be an encouraging thought" (quoted at 188). Neither Jackson nor Dickerson goes on to quote Frodo's response to Gandalf: "It is not". This response, I think, captures the difference between a sentimental and a thorough reading of Tolkien's text, and of his theology. Good theology, as much as good fiction, needs to allow for the uncertainties and doubts that characterise so much of life. While Dickerson's book is at times instructive, it is ultimately too cheerful about these contingencies to do full justice to the complexities of either Middle or planet Earth.

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## Urban Ministry and the Kingdom of God

Laurie Green. London: SPCK, London, 2003. 192 pp. ISBN 0281055300. \$52.95

**Writing for a church** in an urban age, Bishop Laurie Green delivers reflection upon urban development and ministry in Britain. He offers a vision for a people in mission engaged in doing theology 'where their feet are'. Simply, "this book calls the church to a renewed vocation for our urban mission today."

Although the context of this book is British, there is still much to be gained from the elucidation of the urban condition and the shape of urban theology (not least of which is an appreciation of history and a good section of further reading). Appreciation of this book will be greatest for the reader who is prepared to work at relating its insights to their own context.

There are theologians who claim to do contextual theology when, as Laurie Green reminds us in the preface, they are merely drawing abstract conclusions about their context. That's the perennial difficulty of the academy. In a sense, Green has these people in mind; hoping perhaps that they might begin to be less preoccupied with their disembodied constructions, and recover instead the dangerous memory of why and theology is done. His hope, in other words, is that they might more fully realise that in theology there is no getting away from two fundamental questions: *where are we?* and *whose are we?* This is the primary datum of theology, and also of Green's book.

Green draws upon the pastoral cycle (an implementation of the learning cycle) developed in his *Let's Do Theology* for the structure of this book. He does this to good affect in ten concisely written chapters spread over four parts, focussing respectively upon *practice, analysis, reflection,* and

*response.*

As well as offering a narrative which tells something of Green's own story, Part One offers an engaging if somewhat brief survey of the place of the city in the story of the bible, examining "God's pain and its rife injustices". It goes on to include a multi-disciplinary and accessible discussion of the nature of what "urban" is and how it is formed. It concludes by telling the story of urban mission and offering reflections upon it: a tour of significant signposts and trends in thirteen pages.

Part Two offers critical analysis of the British context and the new urban features which have emerged in the last twenty years. Whilst imperative for the methodology of the book, I suppose some readers may feel this section is perhaps of less direct relevance to the reader in Aotearoa/New Zealand, although similarities and parallels can be traced with ease. Such is the local-global relationship of our experience in the minority world.

In Part Three we find Green "doing theology" by reflecting upon urban mission and the urban context in the light of the Jesus story which was itself contextual, and remains relevant. Thus, Green reflects upon context in the light of the Kingdom of God. Green identifies the Lord's Prayer as that which helps to remind us to how to play our part in the Kingdom: "The prayer empowers our imaginations and keeps us true to the story of Jesus so that we, his disciples, can continue his mission in the power of the Spirit and to God's glory." Chapter 7 uses the Lord's Prayer as a way of steering our reflection upon how we can be people of the Kingdom, using stories from Green's experience and mining the resources of faith as challenge-in-response.

Finally, it is in Part Four that Green responds with a Kingdom-based ministry and mission as a way forward for the people of God. Note that the emphasis is – refreshingly – upon the Kingdom, not church. Here, in particular, he

reflects directly upon the need to remember where we come from and whose we are (“the need to pray, worship, and sink ourselves in the story of Jesus”), before moving on to the importance of community in urban ministry: “we cannot operate alone. In all we do we need friends – other disciples to be alongside, working... in critical solidarity with the community in which we are set.” The style of urban ministry is further teased out in subsequent chapters, which focus on things like the need for social analysis and building networks. Although his vision for the future, which uses his pastoral cycle, could have been fleshed out more fully, it remains well focussed.

This volume is a positive contribution to a field that is, thankfully, gaining increased attention from publishers and theologians alike, and it is written by a leading theologian in the field. The rich and varied call of urban ministry and urban theology are imperatives for the future direction of theology – the urban and suburban are the dominant context in which the “missional church” will take shape and find expression. Green’s passion for the city is self-evident. His narrative and analysis is engaging, moving, and in places humorous, stimulating the reader on many levels. It is a work which reflects a faith and a wisdom born of experience and a sense of place, and reminds us of (or introduces us to) a highly effective model for urban ministry (practice, analysis, reflection, response). We need to be mindful of voices like Laurie Green, and – perhaps even more so – to those closer to home.

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## Technology and Human Becoming

Philip Hefner. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. 97pp. ISBN 0800636082.

**This small book** is adapted from sermons given at the annual conference of the *Institute on Religion in an Age of Science*, on Star Island, off the coast of Maine, in 2001. The theme of the conference was “Human Meaning in a Technological Culture,” and Hefner begins his discourse with two images. The first, a poem, is anti-technology – *The Anecdote of the Jar* by Wallace Stevens. The surprising second: an embrace of technology as transformation by the ever-hopeful French Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin, as he reflected on the cyclotron and the atomic bomb. While these are diametrically opposed reactions to technology, Hefner sees them as related movements pulling us in opposite directions, the one externalising, the other internalising technical phenomena. Importantly, however, Hefner claims that technology is, more than anything else, undoubtedly *rearranging* everything – including our sin expressed by the first image, and our hope expressed in the second. For Hefner, though, one seems to take priority:

*We can pose the question, whether the image of the jar is more or less adequate than the image of Teilhard inside the cyclotron. Indeed, we must raise the question. We might ask, as well, whether the one image belongs to an earlier phase of our becoming, say the phase of adolescence, whereas the other belongs to our adulthood* (p.11).

Human becoming. Inside and out. Boundaries are being blurred. This is what Hefner wants to emphasise – the ambiguity of ourselves as persons with artificial hips, or watching, as he did, his own colonoscopy a screen. We might experience alienation, but this – with reconciliation – has always

been a part of the spiritual journey. Whatever else, the technology is us, within us, and now a part of our spiritual struggle. To this end he poses more questions than answers. Good questions: “If our self is techno-self, what is added to our understanding of alienation and reconciliation?” And this: “How...does God become flesh when that flesh is techno-flesh?” (p.27).

For Hefner, technology is a mirror. It shows us what we want – to live complex lives – with cars, phones and surgery to help. Technology exposes our own mortality; the technology will outlive us. And in this, says Hefner, “in its engagement with finitude and death, technology becomes almost explicitly religious.” Since it is the medium for these concerns and questions, technology is both religious and theological. “Indeed,” he claims boldly, “technology may be more religiously gripping than a sacred liturgy and more theologically urgent than a sacred dogma” (p.37). We see in technology our desire to create new worlds, and also, he adds, our inability to know the reasons or the values by which they are created.

Relating to the movie *AI* Hefner claims that the greatest gift of humans is that they wish for things that do not exist. “Only humans can believe in what is not actual” (p.44). Freedom and imagination, and ultimately dying are all linked. And stories. What we do is dependent on stories, scientists and religious people alike. But in both, he argues, there is a reluctance to admit this, and a desire to “fence off fact from story” (p.68). And more questions. “Are there criteria governing our stories?” (p.69); “When we are confronted with millions of meanings of life, how do we find our way?” (p.72).

Hefner ends with a dilemma. He admits that when surveyed most people admit to having religious experiences either in church or in nature, yet he is committed to the idea that technology shapes our future. He senses danger in the absence of depth or perceived

collusion between the technology and the theological. We must not think we are *dealing with* technology. We are now technology. Within it. Theologically, he gets around this by talking about our being co-creators, technological co-creators with God. We will transcend ourselves:

*What is the significance of the fact that on our planet, at least, God has set up a system in which the creatures who transcend humans in the chain of evolution may be creatures we have designed and created, so that their act of transcending us is at the same time our own act of transcending ourselves? (p.80).*

I found the book well-crafted and engaging, but not ultimately convincing. Some great optimists are inspiring because they seem to glimpse a spiritual dimension obscured to the rest of us. Teilhard de Chardin is one of these. Hefner less so. He doesn't shy away from the hard decisions and moral values technology offers us. He is partly correct that we are now in and transformed by technology. And it is all at times quite fascinating. Technology is especially wonderful in the way it opens up the natural. But there is also subtle moral pressure. If we are postmodern – in touch with the current world perhaps – we will embrace all this, he suggests. But is this so? Other postmodern trends are neopaganism and occult spirituality. It is also possible that there is a givenness to nature, and God's voice within it that is now obscured by technology. There is a great deal at stake; for church and for society. If we are drawn into the technological future Hefner's wisdom will help us to find meaning there. But there may yet be a place at some other level for spiritual resistance to cyborgs and the techno-flesh.

**Nicola Hoggard Creegan**

## **A Question of Faith; A History of the New Zealand Christian Pacifist Society**

David Grant. Wellington: Philip Garside Publishing Ltd, 2004. ISBN 0958227586.

**David Grant's** *A Question of Faith* is a detailed chronicle of the Christian Pacifist Society; from its establishment in 1936 to its eventual dissolution in 2002. In places, Grant's work focuses on the activities and lives of some of the more well-known individuals in the Society, particularly on co-founders Ormond Burton and A.C. Barrington. On the whole, however, it is concerned with the rise and fall of the Society more generally, and explores the dedication and conviction that extended far beyond its better-known personalities. When Basil Dowling (a Presbyterian Minister and prominent leader within the movement) was arrested in 1941 as part of a wider crackdown on dissenters, he gave the following rationale for his actions:

*My reason to engage in street speaking despite the prohibition is not based on an estimation of probable results to myself or the cause of peace but because the Christian gospel of love to all men, including our enemies, must be protected no less in wartime than it is in peace and if the law forbids then God must be obeyed rather than man and the punishment of the law willingly accepted... (p.40).*

Dowling's words aptly encapsulate themes characteristic of the Society throughout its history. Both in its heyday during World War II (when the vigils, soap-box rallies, demonstrations and arrests were all a regular occurrence), and in the years since (when the Society has been far less prominent), the Christian Pacifist Society remained a good and faithful witness. Often this faithfulness was irrespective of any actual success or affected change – irrespective of any "estimation of probable results." Moreover, throughout its history CPS remained faithfully grounded

in the Christian gospel, and while it worked alongside secular peace groups, at times closely, it always resisted amalgamating or broadening its own basis. Even as numbers began to decline, CPS resisted relinquishing its own calling and agenda as a distinctly Christian organisation.

The most dramatic section of the book covers the activities of CPS during World War II. Again what stands out is the willingness of individuals to follow their convictions irrespective of personal cost. When A.C. Barrington and Halford Little toured the country promoting peace,

*... [they] had their soapbox kicked to bits by an angry policeman in Hawera, and when they transferred their meeting to a local reserve the local mayor appealed to citizens not to listen and go home. They suffered the abuse of egg and tomato throwers in Stratford and New Plymouth, were arrested and fined in Wanganui and Gisborne, and returned soldiers, often "liquored up" frogmarched them out to Stratford, Te Kuiti and Tauranga, Barrington being twice pushed off the rostrum. (p.30).*

Additional pressure came from the political powers of the day, and Grant outlines the abuses and inadequacies of the legal mechanisms for managing conscientious objectors and dissenters. What emerges, among other things, is the comparative severity of such treatment in New Zealand as opposed to Britain and other Western Countries (p.47). Hostility and abuse towards peace advocates also came from within the churches, and even within the Methodist Church (where many of the more prominent members of CPS came from), CPS largely remained a voice in the wilderness. Its mission, both during and since the war, was as much one of proselytising Christians as of trying to influence the Government and society.

The book itself has been beautifully laid-out and published, and is illustrated throughout by photos of various individuals,

groups and events. Grant displays impressive research ability and a meticulous eye for detail. The work draws upon the recollections of those involved (and a series of interviews conducted by the author in the eighties), the minutes and financial records of CPS, and the Society's own bulletins. He also draws upon his own earlier work on New Zealand pacifism,<sup>1</sup> work which has established him as New Zealand's leading historian in this field. It is perhaps worth noting that Grant's book is simply what it claims to be – a history of the Christian Pacifist Society. At no point does Grant explicitly argue for or justify an anti-war position, and those seeking such would be better to look elsewhere. While Grant's work inevitably captures and conveys much of the passion and drive of those at the Society's heart (which in itself makes a case for peace) this is not its primary concern. As a history it locates the CPS within a broader context. In particular it sets the slow decline of CPS against the backdrop of the growing secularisation of post-war society, and the rise of a new generation of protesters and activists who found inspiration and motivation outside Christianity.

A *Question of Faith* provides a potential resource for contemporary Christians activists; and particularly those similarly seeking to pursue peace and justice from distinctively Christian framework. It indicates precedence for the often uncomfortable alliance Christians find themselves in with more militant peace groups and protests.<sup>2</sup> It indicates precedence for the way of Governments expediently disregard human rights, civil liberties and due legal process during wartime, and in times where prisoners are held without trial at Guantanamo Bay – and more locally where Ahmed Zaoui is denied access to even a summary of allegations against him – the history of the Christian Pacifist Society offers a model for hope and action. The legacy of CPS is the call to witness and agitate for change

regardless of any “estimation of probable results,” quite simply because that is the call of the gospel. Whether for historical interest, or for such excavating and strengthening the foundations of contemporary Christian peace efforts, I would recommend David Grant's *A Question of Faith*.

#### Endnotes

1. See David Grant, *Out in the Cold; Pacifists and Conscientious Objectors in New Zealand During World War II* (Auckland, 1986).
2. Grant recounts Burton's experience of “alienation” at finding himself in protests whose methods he was in disagreement with (p.90).

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### Good News to the Poor – Sharing the gospel through social involvement.

T Chester. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004. 195 pages. ISBN 1-84474-019-6.

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Eph. 2: 8-10).*

From Paul to the present, debate has raged over the precise nature of the relationship between faith and works, and further how this is to be negotiated in the life of the believer. Tim Chester's *Good News to the Poor* wishes to contribute to this debate, and more specifically extend it into contemporary evangelical circles. By firmly holding onto both faith and works, Chester “aims to present a biblical case for evangelical social action... [and] offer a critique of some of the

theology and practice of social action within evangelicalism.”<sup>1</sup>

What emerges, in essence, is unremarkable. While Chester nicely summarises the thinking-evangelical's view, and even makes a strong case for evangelism and social action as distinct yet inseparable (and also that the proclamation of the good news must be central to both), on the whole I feel he misses his audience. Either he is addressing himself to evangelicals with no previous history of social action, in which case the book lacks the emotional appeal that would likely be more familiar and impacting. Such an audience might be better off reading Dave Andrew's *Christi-Anarchy* (Lion Publishing 1999). Conversely, Chester is seeking to make a contribution to the evangelical theological tradition via a critique of evangelical praxis and involvement with the poor, in which case he has spent too long establishing already-accepted assumptions, and not enough time contributing something new. For these readers I would recommend ditching the middleman and going straight to texts like David Bosch's *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis 1997) or perhaps John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* (Eerdmans 1972).

I cannot help but agree with most of the conclusions that Chester reaches. He has carefully avoided the heresy of the single cause, and has put his case for the status quo in the development of theology and praxis in evangelicalism. I am not sure, however, that is the extent of the contribution he intended to make.

#### Endnotes

1. Chester T. 2004. *Good News to the Poor*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 12.

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