

Latimer Trust

Monthly Reading List – January 2021

This is a summary of recent books read by Martin Davie, compiling his evaluations and the commendations of others. In this edition:

Author	Title	Martin's opinion
J Scott Duvall and J Daniel Hays	God's Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology	Duvall and Hays offer a fresh way of looking at the Bible as a whole. They propose that the 'mega-theme' of the Bible is God's desire for relationship with his people, and they argue that this enables us make sense of the Bible as a whole. Scholarly and readable.
Matthew Harmon	The Servant of the Lord and his Servant People	This book aims to help readers understand our identity as human beings by considering the biblical theme of the 'servant of the Lord' from Genesis to Revelation – Jesus first and foremost, but also Adam, Moses, Joshua, Paul, etc, and believers today. Helpful.
Keith L Johnson	The Essential Karl Barth: A Reader and Commentary	Best introduction for anyone beginning their study of Karl Barth's life and work – a helpful overview of the development of Barth's thought, a good summary of the key ideas in the <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , and a clear indication of how Barth applied his theology in his engagement with 20th-century politics.
Gilbert Meilaender	Bioethics: A Primer for Christians	An excellent basic, reliable Christian guide to bioethics written by an expert. Covers topics such as genetics, prenatal screening, suicide and euthanasia, organ donation, human medical experimentation, etc. Ideal for theological students, Christian medical students, or other Christians faced with these issues either personally or professionally. Read it and then lend it to others.
Ed Shaw	Purposeful Sexuality: A Short Christian Introduction	A short introduction to sexuality from a Christian perspective, looking at why we find it difficult to talk about sexuality, what sexuality is for, how this understanding of sexuality helps us, and what God does to help us. A really excellent book – clear, biblically based, and addresses the key issues that people need to understand in order to see why Christianity has good news to proclaim with regard to human sexuality. Read yourself and then lend/give it away to others.

J Scott Duvall and J Daniel Hays, *God's Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology*, Baker Academic, ISBN 978-0-8010-4959-0, £19.99 (hardback and e editions also available)

Overview:

One of the perennial problems facing those who want to understand the Bible for themselves, or teach it to others, is how to make sense of the Bible as a whole, given that it is a collection of sixty-six different books which were written at different times, for different purposes, and in a whole variety of different literary genres. Down the centuries Christian scholars have addressed this issue in various ways, and in their new book *God's Relational Presence* Scott Duvall and Daniel Hays from Ouachita Baptist University in the United States offer a fresh way of looking at it. Their proposal is that God's desire for relationship with his people, and the action he takes to establish and maintain this relationship, is the 'megatheme' which runs through the whole of the biblical material and enables us make sense of it as a whole.

As they explain in their introduction:

Our basic thesis is that the Triune God desires to have a personal, encountering relationship with his people and enters into his creation in order to facilitate that relationship. Thus the Bible begins with God's presence relating to his people in the garden (Genesis) and ends with God's presence relating to his people in the garden (Revelation). This holy, intense, powerful presence of God appears to Moses in the burning bush and on Mount Sinai, and then enters into the tabernacle (and later into the temple) so that God can dwell among his people. Indeed, the presence of God dwelling among his people is foundational to his covenant with them, and Israel's worshiping relationship with God centers on his presence in the tabernacle or temple. Yet because of their sin and disobedience, Israel is banished from God's presence. God departs from the temple (Ezekiel), and Israel is exiled away from the land. The restoration of God's presence is promised throughout the OT prophets and is fulfilled in the Gospels when Jesus, Immanuel (God with us), appears. The incarnation brings to a climax the relational presence of God, the theme that drove the entire OT story. In Acts, after Jesus's ascension, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within each believer, just as the holy presence of God in the OT dwelt in the tabernacle or temple. Paul explains the broad, far-reaching theological implications of the Triune God's relational presence among his people. Indeed, almost every aspect of Paul's theology connects to the relational presence of God. The entire story culminates at the end of Revelation, where the presence of God is once again in Jerusalem (the new Jerusalem) and in the garden, relating to his people. This "megatheme" drives the biblical story, uniting and providing interconnecting cohesion across the canon for all of the other major themes, such as covenant, kingdom, creation, holiness, redemption, law and grace, sin and forgiveness, life and death, worship, and obedient living. It is indeed the cohesive center of biblical theology.

They further explain that when they say that the theme of God's relational presence should be seen as the centre of biblical theology, they are:

...neither ignoring nor downplaying the importance of other prevalent and highly significant biblical themes (e.g., covenant, kingdom of God), but rather suggesting that the cohesive central megatheme of God's relational presence connects all of these other themes into the big overarching plot of the biblical story. In our view, most of these other major biblical themes are actually "subplots" (so to speak), each of which is interconnected and related to the megastory of God's relational presence. Our subtitle for this book, 'The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology,' reflects this argument for the relational presence of God as that 'spiderweb-like cohesive center' that ties all of the major biblical themes together as it likewise moves God's story forward from the beginning to the end.

Their book consists of six main chapters which look in turn at the 'Relational Presence of God' in the Pentateuch, in the historical books, the Psalms, and the Wisdom books, in the prophets, in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, in the letters of Paul, Hebrews and the letters of James, Peter and Jude, and finally in John's Gospel, John's letters and Revelation. The book finishes with a conclusion that draws the threads together by summarising the book's overall argument.

Martin's opinion:

This book is a very helpful contribution to the discussion of how to make sense of the biblical material. It succeeds in showing that the relational presence of God is indeed a 'megatheme' that runs through the biblical material and that links together the biblical story line and the range of other theological themes that the Bible contains. This is a book that is both scholarly and readable and will be very helpful to anyone who wants to understand better how the Bible fits together. One of the major attacks on the Bible at the moment consists of the claim that it is an incoherent and self-contradictory collection of material. By focussing on the theme of God's relational presence Duvall and Hays help their readers to see that this is not the case. Highly recommended.

Commendations:

David Firth writes:

'From creation to new creation, God's relational presence stands as a cohesive center for the whole Bible. With care and clarity, Duvall and Hays trace this through the canon, demonstrating both its prevalence and its relevance for understanding how the Bible fits together. This will be essential reading for all courses on biblical theology.'

Matthew Harmon, *The Servant of the Lord and his Servant People*, IVP, ISBN 978-1-78974-210-7, £14.99 (e edition also available).

Overview:

Matthew Harmon is Professor of New Testament studies at Grace College and Theological Seminary in the United States and the author of a number of biblical commentaries and other books on the interpretation of Scripture. The starting point for his new volume in the IVP New Studies in Biblical Theology series is the observation that:

Identity is arguably the defining issue of our contemporary western culture. At one level humanity has always sought to understand who we are, but developments within the past 500 years have brought the issue of identity to the forefront in fresh ways. The question of identity affects us as individuals, as communities and as the people of God. Yet sadly, in the contemporary quest for identity, the Bible is often neglected or ignored, even among professing Christians. But only in Scripture do we find authoritative and infallible answers to the question of who we are as human beings. In order for the church to proclaim and live out a compelling picture of what it means to be human, we must first understand what Scripture says about human identity.

However, understanding what the Bible says about human identity presents a challenge because:

The Bible has so much to say about our identity as human beings that it is challenging to know where to begin. But rather than paralyse us, the presence of so much material allows us to explore the question of identity from a wide variety of entry points.

The purpose of Harmon's book is to contribute 'to understanding our identity as human beings from a biblical perspective.' The specific entry point or 'angle' from which it does this is:

...to trace the key biblical theme of the servant of the Lord from Genesis to Revelation. I am not arguing that this is the most significant biblical theme for understanding identity's human beings; rather, I am proposing that it is an important and sometimes overlooked theme that helps us to better understand the metanarrative of Scripture as well as our identity as human beings.

The book is not a word study of the term 'the servant of the Lord' since Scripture uses 'a variety of different terms and expressions' to describe those who act as servants of the Lord and in 'some instances the biblical text portrays an individual or group of people acting as a servant of the Lord without explicitly using such terminology.' What the book explores is how Scripture describes the reality of people being the servants of the Lord and not just its use of this specific term.

As Harmon explains, each of the main chapters of his book addresses:

...a specific individual who is identified as a servant of the Lord. Based on a careful reading of the biblical text (with insight from the broader historical cultural and social context along the way), I will attempt to identify and summarise the nature of his role within God's purposes for both creation and redemption.'

'Along the way,' he says:

...we will see the consistent pattern that God uses each individual servant to produce a servant people. Therefore, tracing this servant thread throughout Scripture sheds fresh light on (1) the role of these key figures in redemptive history; (2) how these key figures point forward to Christ; (3) the identity of God's people; and (4) how we interact with fellow believers and the word around us.

The eight main chapters of the book look in turn at 'Adam: The first servant,' 'Moses: a servant Prophet,' 'Joshua; the servant conqueror,' 'David: the servant King,' 'Isaianic servant: the suffering servant,' Jesus: the servant par excellence, 'The apostles: servants of Christ', 'the church: a servant people.' The chapter on Jesus looks at how the New Testament applies servant language to Jesus and how he fulfils the ministry of previous servants of the Lord. The chapter on the apostles looks at Paul, Paul's co-workers, Peter, James, Jude and John. Finally, the chapter on the church looks at the servant character of the church in the Gospel and Acts, the Pauline epistles, the Catholic epistles and lastly Revelation.

A final chapter looks at the implications of the biblical material on the servants of Lord for the life of the church today. It argues that the pattern of servants producing more servants still applies. Christians are called to be servant of the Lord who help others become servants of the lord in their turn.

Martin's opinion:

This is a very helpful book that highlights an important aspect of the biblical material. When we think of the servant of the Lord we tend to think almost exclusively of Jesus. However, as Harmon shows, although in Scripture Jesus is the servant *par excellence*, others are called by God to be his servants as well, the church as a whole is described using servant language, and Christians are still called to be the servants of the Lord today. Furthermore, the biblical call to servanthood challenges the emphasis in the contemporary society on an individualism that all too often means putting our own perceived needs before the needs of others. This book needs to be read by those studying the biblical material on servanthood at theological colleges or on training courses, and it would also make a good basis for a sermon series, or for series of home group studies.

Commendations:

Don Carson has written:

'When most Christians hear the expression 'the servant of the Lord', they think of the portrait of the suffering servant painted in Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12. This is not so much wrong as reductionistic. Displaying a variety of dominating characteristics, other servants of the Lord (whether that terminology is used or not) repeatedly surface in Scripture, including Adam, Moses, Joshua, David, the apostles. Jesus appears as the servant *par excellence*, the One who fulfils the patterns they establish. After Jesus, it soon transpires that his apostles are also servants, and collectively his redeemed followers are to be a servant people. In this distinctive volume of biblical theology, Dr Harmon connects the dots that some of us have overlooked, and enriches not only our understanding but also our discipleship.'

Keith L. Johnson, *The Essential Karl Barth: A Reader and Commentary*, Baker Academic, ISBN 978-1-54096-073-3, £25.00 (paperback and e editions also available).

Overview:

It is generally accepted that Karl Barth was the most significant Protestant theologian since John Calvin and that he was in fact one of the most significant Christian theologians of all time, up there with Calvin, Luther, Aquinas and Augustine. It follows that anyone who seriously wishes to understand the development of Christian theology needs to get to grips with Barth's work. The problem for the new student of Barth, however, is where to begin. Barth wrote literally millions of words and his thought developed over the course of his career, and it is not easier for someone new to his work to see the wood for the trees. What they need is a reliable guide, and that is what Keith Johnson's new book, *The Essential Karl Barth*, provides.

As Johnson explains, his goal in writing this book was to:

...make Barth's thought accessible, to explain his ideas clearly, and to provoke further reading. I tried to offer the commentary I wish had been available to me when I first started reading Barth.

To do this he provides a selection of Barth's most important writings gathered together in one volume. The volume begins with an introduction to Barth's life and career. After that it is divided into three main parts. In Johnson's words:

Part I provides an overview of Karl Barth's development through texts that show how Barth refined his ideas over the course of his career. Part 2 features passages from Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, the work that occupied the majority of his life. Part 3 offers a sample sermon and other key texts that show how Barth responded to the threat provided by the Nazi government in Germany.

As he goes on to say, each of these three parts:

...opens with an essay that explains its purpose and structure. Each selection begins with an introduction that provides the context for that text and summarised its argument the sections also feature editorial footnotes designed to help the reader grasp Barth's claims more clearly.

The volume ends with a concluding chapter that looks at the significance of Barth's life and theological legacy.

Martin's opinion:

As I have already indicated, this book is a reliable guide for students beginning their study of Karl Barth's life and work. The texts in this anthology are well chosen and give a helpful overview of the development of Barth's thought, a good introduction to the key ideas in the *Church Dogmatics*, and a clear indication of how Barth applied his theology in his engagement with twentieth century politics. Johnson's introductory material and footnotes are also helpful in assisting readers to have a proper understanding of the texts they are looking at and the points that Barth is seeking to make through them. For anyone approaching Barth for the first time this is probably now the best introduction to choose.

Commendations:

George Hunsinger comments:

'This is the best one-volume anthology of Barth's theology available in English. Barth's writings are thoughtfully selected to cover his early development, his mature theology, and his political development. Keith Johnson's critical commentary is superb. This book will be of great service not only in the classroom but also in the pastor's study and in the hands of any interested reader. It deserves a wide readership wherever there is interest in Karl Barth.'

Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians*, Eerdmans, ISBN 978-0802878168 , £15.01 (e and audio editions also available).

Overview:

Gilbert Meilaender is an American theologian and ethicist who is Professor of Christian Ethics at Valparaiso University and a member of the President's Council on Bioethics. His book *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians* is the fourth edition of a book originally published in 1996. As he explains in the Preface to the new edition, he has 'brought the text up to date in quite a few places where that was needed,' has 'slightly increased the discussion of protecting physician's consciences in the practice of medicine' and has 'noted the implications of recent advances in genetics (in particular, the CRISPR/Cas 9 method of gene editing).'

Meilaender notes that the development of bioethics (the ethics of medical activity) as a specialised branch of ethics in recent years has resulted in a situation in which bioethics has come to:

...focus more and more upon public policy – which in our society inevitably means a minimal lowest common denominator ethic capable, it is thought, of securing moral consensus. In this process reflection upon the moral meaning of health and medicine becomes increasingly secularised – driven by the view that public consensus must exclude the larger questions about human nature and destiny that religious belief raises.

Meilaender accepts that 'there is a place for such minimalist bioethics, but his book, he says,

...aims at something different. I write as a Christian for other Christians who want to think about these issues. Anyone is, of course, welcome to listen in and consider what the world looks like from this angle of vision, but the discussion is not nay is not aimed at 'anyone.' It is aimed at those who name as Lord the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and who believe that this Lord lived as one of us in Jesus of Nazareth. The two testaments of Christian scripture bear witness to this God and authoritatively (even if often ambivalently) shape the vision of Christians when they turn to the contemporary concerns of bioethics. It is obvious, of course, as a matter of empirical fact, that not all Christians agree with the judgments I make in this book. But when I attempt here to write Christian ethics, I do not mean that I have taken a survey of the opinions of Christians all written history of their views. Rather, I have tried to say what we Christians ought to say in order to be faithful to the truth that has claimed as in Jesus.

After his introduction Meilaender begins the main body of his book with a chapter entitled 'Christian vision' which considers 'certain key elements in a Christian vision of the world.' This chapter looks from a Christian perspective at the issues of individuals and the community, freedom and finitude, the relation between people and their bodies, suffering, and disease and healing. There are then eleven chapters that explore what Christians should say about procreation and reproduction, abortion, advances in genetics, prenatal screening, suicide and euthanasia, the right to refuse treatment, who has the right to make medical decisions, organ donation, human medical experimentation, the ethics of research involving embryos, and the ethics of sickness and health in general.

Martin's opinion:

This is quite a short book (176 pages). It is, as its title says, a primer, a basic introduction to the topics it covers. It is, however, very well written by an expert in the field, the new edition is up to date with all the latest development and discussion about the issues it covers, and it addresses the issues it covers from an orthodox Christian standpoint. Anyone who wants a detailed discussion of the issues introduced in this book will need to look elsewhere, but theological students, Christian medical students, or other Christians faced with these issues either personally or professionally, who want a basic, reliable Christian guide to these matters will find this volume invaluable. A book to read and to lend to others.

Commendations:

The review in *First Things* declares:

'The Christian who simply wants to get a reliable handle on bioethics will find nothing better than this splendid little book ... It is seldom, and therefore all the more welcome, that one who is a master of his field takes the time to walk the non-specialist through it. Meilaender does that without a hint of condescension, and with an easy style that will engage those who might otherwise be intimidated by his expertise. Highly recommended.'

Ed Shaw, *Purposeful Sexuality: A Short Christian Introduction*, IVP, ISBN 978-1-78974-283-1, £7.99, (e edition also available).

Overview

Ed Shaw is Pastor of Emmanuel City Church, Bristol, and part of the editorial team at Living Out and is a well-known and well-regarded speaker and author. As he explains in his introduction, his new book *Purposeful Sexuality* provides a 'short introduction to sexuality' from a Christian perspective. The book looks in turn at why we find it difficult to talk about sexuality, what sexuality is for, how this understanding of sexuality helps us, and what God does to help us.

As Shaw sees it, the reason why we find it so difficult to talk about sexuality is that we all have unique sexual feelings and experiences; our sexualities are all damaged in unique ways and we all damage others and ourselves through our sexualities in unique ways; and finally, because we all know we need help in this area, but are not clear where to find it. However, the good news that Christianity gives us is that:

...the God who created us, who gave us sexuality, has not left us to fend for ourselves when it comes to expressing ourselves sexually in right and confident ways. Instead, he has given us all the help we need in his written word to us and, most of all, in the humanity of his son. God is not as afraid of talking about sexuality as we are – the Bible is full of sexual imagery and language – and in the person of Jesus he has experienced for himself what it's like to have a sexuality. We haven't been left alone to sort out the mess of our sexualities – in him (and him alone) we have all the help we need.

On the issue of what sexuality is for, Shaw suggests that the three traditional Christian answers, that it is for the union of a husband and wife in marriage, for the procreation of children, and for sharing pleasure, are 'good and true' as far as they go, but they are unsatisfactory because they do not explain the purpose of sexuality for those who are not yet married or who have a sexuality that means that they cannot get married to someone of the opposite sex and have children.

Rather than simply seeing sexuality in these three traditional ways, Shaw argues that what we learn from Scripture is that:

We have sexuality, sexual experiences and feelings so that we can grasp God's love for us and to point us to where this world is heading. And where is that? The Bible tells us: the human story begins with a marriage (the first man to the first woman), and it tells us that human history will end with a wedding too – another union in difference (between God's son, Jesus, and God's people, the church). This is where everything is heading – to an eternal union, the permanent coming together of heaven and earth, and to what sounds like the best wedding reception ever.

This understanding of the purpose of human sexuality helps us in a number of ways. It helps us to see that the reason that human beings are designed to be in sexual relationship with those of the opposite sex (a fact being increasingly recognised by non-Christian gay voices) is as a pointer to the union-in-difference between Christ and the church. It helps us to see that it is legitimate to appreciate the beauty of another human being, since this is a pointer to the perfect beauty of the God who created them. It helps us to see those who either do not have sex (or have unsatisfactory sex) in this life need not ultimately miss out since they will be able to participate in the perfect union with God to which human sex points. It helps us to understand why sexual temptation is so powerful – because the importance of human sexuality means that it is the focus of the spiritual attack being mounted on us by the Devil.

What God does to help us is most of all to send Jesus, who lived life as a sexual being, but (unlike us) lived it perfectly as is shown by the story of his encounter with a Samaritan woman by the well at Sychar recorded in John 4. The importance of this for us is that:

We get to swap sexual histories with Jesus. He gets all our sexual sins: our lust, fantasies, porn addiction, sex outside marriage, selfish sex within marriage, sexual abuse, sexual repression (only you will know precisely what he bears for you). And what do we get in return? We get all Jesus' sexual purity: his self-sacrificial, perfect sexual integrity as he chats with the Samaritan woman, his treatment of her as a real person and not a sexual threat. We get Jesus' perfect sexual history.

This means that:

...although there will always be things for us to repent of, there is no need for us to feel permanently crushed by sexual guilt and shame, because Jesus has taken our guilt and shame for us. On the cross he felt it, and through the cross he paid for it completely. It is now gone for ever.

Furthermore:

Jesus is now in the business of helping us to express our sexuality purposefully as he lives inside us. By his Spirit, he now dwells within us and he's working to help us use our bodies, our sexuality, as he used his: self-sacrificially to point others to a lasting satisfaction is to be found we have not been left alone but have – in Christ alone – all the resources we need to change.

Martin's opinion:

This is a really excellent book on human sexuality. It is clear, biblically based, and addresses the key issues that people need to understand in order to see why Christianity has good news to proclaim with regard to human sexuality. Christians need to read it themselves and then lend or give it away to others. It would make an excellent basis for a sermon series or for a home group course and it will be a key resource for the discussions on the *Living in Love and Faith* material. A useful idea might also be for a church to show the CEEC film *The Beautiful Story* and have copies of Shaw's book to give away to those who attend.

Commendations:

Kristi Mair has commented:

'I am so thankful I am a sexual being! Ed's book is a much-needed hurricane of fresh air on the purpose of sexuality. As a single heterosexual woman, I am once more staggered by God's kindness in crafting me with sexual desire so that I may more tangibly appreciate his love for me. Ed's short book is beautifully biblical, richly pastoral and deeply evocative. A glorious vision of human flourishing is to be found within these pages. I am *more* for having read this.'