

Latimer Trust

Monthly Reading List – Dec 2025

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
Andrew Campbell	<i>One for the Other: Engaging with Nonviolent Atonement Theology</i>	A book that deserves to be widely read by ministers, theological students and lay Christians who are capable of engaging with a work of serious academic theology. Campbell shows very clearly that a traditional cross-centred view of the atonement leads Christians to value the worth of the oppressed, condemn their oppression and take appropriate action against it.
W Ross Hastings	<i>The Glory of the Ascension: Celebrating a Doctrine for the Life of the Church</i>	This describes clearly and comprehensively how the doctrine of the ascension reveals the glory of the person and work of Christ and therefore needs to be celebrated rather than neglected in the life of the Church. Thoroughly recommended to any Christian who wants to understand better the nature and significance of the ascension. Although it is an academic study it is thoroughly readable and deserves a wide readership.
Timothy Keller	<i>What is Wrong with the World?: The Surprising, Hopeful Answer to the Question We Cannot Avoid</i>	A clear, comprehensive and challenging study of the nature of sin and how we can be saved from it through the grace of God. It is a book that Christians need to read in order to realise what sin really is and their need to turn to God for healing from it. And it is a book that Christians can confidently give to enquirers who want to know what the Christian faith teaches about sin and why it matters.
Lee Strobel	<i>The Case for Christmas: A Journalist Investigates the Identity of the Child in the Manger</i>	An excellent introduction to the key issues surrounding the birth of Jesus. It draws on reliable scholarship but mediates the results of this scholarship in a very readable fashion. It can be strongly recommended for Christians who want to understand this part of their faith better and for enquirers who want to know what Christians believe about the nature and significance of the birth of Jesus.
Miroslav Volf	<i>The Cost of Ambition: How Striving to Be Better Than Others Makes Us Worse</i>	An enormously important and timely book. Volf shows that the whole idea of dividing the world into superiors and inferiors is a harmful falsehood and that the Christian faith shows us a better way. This a heavy-weight academic book and not everyone will be up to reading it, but those who are should do so and should then share its vital message with others.

Andrew Campbell, *One for the Other: Engaging with Nonviolent Atonement Theology (Analyzing Theology)*, Cascade Books, 978-1-66672-863-7, £31.00 (Paperback edition also available).

Overview:

Dr Andrew Campbell is Rector of St Swithin's Parish Church, Magherafelt, in the Church of Ireland Diocese of Armagh. He is also adjunct lecturer of Anglican dogmatic theology at the Church of Ireland Theological Institute.

His book *One for the Other: Engaging with Nonviolent Atonement Theology* is the published form of his doctoral thesis, which was undertaken at Queen's University, Belfast. Its starting point is the observation that in recent years there has been a 'seismic shift' in discussion of the atonement as a result of the argument put forward by non-violent atonement theorists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Rita Nakashima Brock, J. Denny Weaver, and Rene Girard that rather than Christ's death being a part of God's plan, it was a violent and sinful action carried out by human beings.

As Campbell explains, the roots of nonviolent atonement theory lie in what is seen as the link between 'objective cruciform models of atonement' and the legitimisation of violence and abuse, particularly, although not exclusively, against women. For example:

In their paper, 'For God So Loved the World,' Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Ann Parker argue that Christianity is implicated in the conditioning of women to accept abuse and to give up their aspirations, through conveying the 'central image of Christ on the Cross as the saviour of the world,' an image which 'communicates the message that suffering is redemptive.'

As Campbell further explains, in the light of what they see as the problems resulting from traditional theories of the atonement, the proponents of non-violent atonement theory:

... have sought to revise atonement theology in the light of the ethical concerns that they believe were previously neglected. The central aim of these revisions is the removal of violence and oppression from Christian theology ... The voices offering these revisions seek to present an atonement theology in a nonviolent key, with roots deeply planted in ethics and a concern for what I refer to as the Other, borrowing the language of Simone de Beauvoir, Emmanuel Levinas, and others, denoting the oppressed and powerless within society.

In his book Campbell explores in detail what the proponents of nonviolent atonement theory have to say about the atoning work of Christ in the light of the concerns just noted, and considers whether these concerns can be met within the framework of a traditional Christian understanding of the atonement as both something objective achieved by Christ on the Cross and also something that needs to be reflected in the way that Christians behave towards others.

As Campbell sees it, the work of nonviolent atonement theorists raises two 'fundamental questions.' These are, firstly, whether we need to reject the entire idea of the cross as redemptive because of the violence it involved, and, secondly, whether there are ways of viewing the cross that tie in with the Other centred concerns of non-violent atonement theorists. Campbell argues that the answer to the first question is 'No' and the answer to the second question is 'Yes.'

In answer to the first question, he cites the work of Miroslav Volf who argues that God's wrath must extend to all human beings as all are guilty of some wrongdoing. As a result:

.... all of humanity needs condemnation and forgiveness. Volf comments: 'To be just is to condemn the fault and, because of the fault, to condemn the doer as well. To forgive is to condemn the fault but to spare the doer. That's what the forgiving God does.' To do this, God has to act within the moral law that is part of his ontological being; God must separate the wrongdoing from the sinner. By uniting himself with humanity in his incarnation, Christ becomes humanity's 'substitute'; his death, therefore, enacts our death. When he died, we died, and it is this death that separates the wrongdoing from the wrongdoer.

In Campbell's view, this view of the atoning work of Christ means that '... rather than being an object of oppression and abuse the cross of Christ becomes a statement of the worth and value of the Other, calling to account the wrongdoing inflicted upon them by cosmically condemning it.'

In answer to the second question Campbell points to the work of PT Forsyth who, while holding to an objective, cross-centred, atonement model, additionally maintains that '... the hallowing of society, a work initiated at the cross, is picked up and continued through the church. This work of hallowing society mirrors social action required by the Other-centred concerns that we see in nonviolent atonement theologies.'

Campbell's overall conclusion is that we must not 'throw out the baby with the bathwater':

The cross of Christ may be misrepresented and abused for oppressive purposes, but, when faithfully understood, it provides the oppressed Other with the hope of coming justice and affirming their value and worth before God. Secondly, within the Christian tradition, there exist resources that provide us with ethical atonement theology, which calls the church to social action against such oppression.

Martin's opinion:

One for the Other is a book that deserves to be widely read by ministers, theological students and ordinary lay Christians who are capable of engaging with a work of serious academic theology. Campbell takes seriously the proper concerns raised by nonviolent atonement theorists about the way in which the cross of Christ can be used to justify oppression of, and violence against, other people. However, he also shows very clearly that a traditional cross-centred view of the atonement provides the basis for meeting these concerns by leading Christians to value the worth of the oppressed, condemn their oppression and take appropriate action against it.

Commendations:

Hans Boersma writes:

Horizontal relationships may not obscure or replace vertical relationships. This salutary word of caution permeates Andrew Campbell's refutation of nonviolent atonement theologies, which he argues are centered upon the human Other – women (for feminism), outsiders (for René Girard), or the powerless (for Denny Weaver). Drawing on P. T. Forsyth's presentation of the cross as satisfying God's holiness, *One for the Other* powerfully advances an objective view of atonement without losing sight of its moral implications. A model of clarity, fair-mindedness, and nuance, this book offers a significant contribution to the ongoing atonement debates.

W Ross Hastings, *The Glory of the Ascension: Celebrating a Doctrine for the Life of the Church*, IVP Academic, ISBN 978-1-51401-061-7, £25.99 (e book and audio editions also available).

Overview:

W. Ross Hastings is an Anglican priest and theologian who is Professor of Theology at Regent College, Vancouver. He is the author of a number of books including *Missional God*, *Missional Church*; *Total Atonement*; and *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ*.

As its title indicates, the purpose of Hasting's new book from IVP is to celebrate the doctrine of the ascension, a doctrine which he argues is central to the teaching of the New Testament, but which has been neglected in Christian theology since the time of the Church Fathers and is only sparsely referred to in their writings.

In his Introduction, Hastings explains that his new book can be seen as the third part of a trilogy with his books on the atonement and resurrection being parts one and two. In his words:

This work is a capstone to the atonement as the history of the person of Jesus, and though distinct from the resurrection, it is inseparable from it. The resurrection is the completion of the atonement, and the ascension is the celebration of its completeness at the right hand of the Father, where Jesus sat after he ascended in glory.

He further explains that the 'primary theme' of his study of the ascension:

... is, the glory of the ascended Son. This glory is expressed in his coronation, in the acclamation of the Father and the heavenly hosts. This glory is expressed in the offices he assumes, that is, his priestly, kingly, and prophetic ministry in heaven. It is expressed in his reigning over the cosmos at the right hand of the Father; in his recapitulation as the last Adam to form a new humanity; in his application of the atonement to the church and its people; in his sending of the Spirit to incorporate the church in Christ and empower it for its mission to the world, advancing his kingdom and the revelation of his glory throughout the world, anticipating the full expression of the kingdom and glory of Christ at his coming again; in his leading of his church in worship and prayer; in his bringing comfort to suffering humanity.

In the thirteen chapters of his book each of these aspects of the glory of the ascended Christ are studied in turn by means of a study of the relevant biblical material and the teachings on the ascension offered by a range of other Christian theologians from the Patristic period to the present day.

In the first chapter of his book Hastings adds that 'the primary motivating purpose' of his study

... is to describe the sheer glory of the ascension and of the ascended Lord so that readers may be wooed into worship and find themselves entering into their life in the ascended Son. My aim is to be evangelical and not legal in approach. To scold the church for its lack of emphasis and knowledge of the ascension is legal and ultimately unproductive. To paint a picture in words of the Son of God in his glory, and in light of the added glory of his salvific accomplishments, so that the people of God may contemplate and fall afresh in adoring love with him – this is my goal.

Martin's opinion:

The Glory of the Ascension achieves the goal set out in this quotation. It describes clearly and comprehensively how the doctrine of the ascension reveals the glory of the person and work of Christ and therefore needs to be celebrated rather than neglected in the life of the Church. This study can be thoroughly recommended to any Christian whether ordained or lay who wants to understand better the nature and significance of the ascension. Although it is an academic study it is thoroughly readable and deserves a wide readership.

Commendations:

Kevin Vanhoozer writes:

The Glory of the Ascension is a different kind of Christology from above that takes its bearings not from Christ's pre-existence (i.e., the eternal Logos) but, rather, from Christ's post-existence (i.e., resurrection, ascension,

heavenly session). In retrieving this undeservedly neglected episode, Ross Hastings convincingly shows how the ascension is central to Jesus' identity and work, to the whole of salvation history, and ultimately to the glorious end for which the world was created in the first place.

Timothy Keller, *What is Wrong with the World?: The Surprising, Hopeful Answer to the Question We Cannot Avoid*, Hodder and Stoughton, 978-1-39982-964-9, £16.99 (e book and audio editions also available).

Overview:

The late Tim Keller, who died in 2023, was a Presbyterian pastor and apologist who is known for his ministry at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan in 1989 and for his many well-received books covering a variety of topics including Christian theology, ethics and spirituality.

His new book is based on a series of sermons preached in 1990 under the title 'The Faces of Sin' with the sermon material being edited for publication as a book by his wife Kathy.

In the introduction to the book Keller argues that while it is unpopular to talk about sin, nevertheless, it is necessary to have a proper understanding of sin because without it you will lack the necessary pessimism or optimism to deal with the reality of life.

On the one hand, if you believe the reason people do the terrible things they do is because of poor social conditioning or evolution or repressed psychology, you'll never be able to deal with life as it is. You'll be like Agent Starling, speechless before Hannibal Lecter. You won't be pessimistic enough, so to speak to grapple with the bleak realities of life...

On the other hand, without a full understanding of sin you won't have the grounds for the optimism necessary to remain hopeful in the midst of life's harsh realities. Only via a clear view of sin can you see that there are some things that Jesus has done *for* us and has given *to* us and can do *in* us and *is* doing in us that make any earthly happiness look like little but trash. That's what provides the joy and the confidence to survive.

The book consists of ten chapters which are as follows:

1. 'Sin as predator' (Genesis 4:3–15)
2. 'Sin as self-deception' (1 Samuel 15:12–23)
3. 'Sin as leaven' (Mark 8:11–17, 7:25–30)
4. 'Sin as mistrust' (Jeremiah 7:5–14)
5. 'Sin as self-righteousness' (Jonah 2:12, 7; 3:5, 3:1–4, 11)
6. 'Sin as leprosy (Part 1)' (2 Kings 5:1–19)
7. 'Sin as leprosy (Part 2)' (2 Kings 5:1–3, 19–27)
8. 'Sin as slavery' (Numbers 1:4–6, 10–20, 31–34)
9. 'Healing of Sin: True repentance' (Psalm 51:1–10)
10. 'Healing of Sin: Intimacy with God' (Psalm 51:1–19).

In a short review it is impossible to summarise adequately the rich teaching given in these ten chapters, but the following extracts from chapters 2 and 9 will give a flavour of the contents of the book as a whole.

In chapter 2 Keller explains that what we learn from the story of Saul is that what lies at the heart of spiritual self-deception is:

... a refusal to handle the most earth-shattering truth of all. If there is a God, he owns you utterly and you must obey him completely. If there is no God, your life is meaningless and nothing is truly right or wrong and no one knows which end is up.

We don't want the latter to be true of course. But many of us don't want the former to be true either, because if it is, it means total submission. It means we can't just say, 'I'm going to live my life how I want, but I'll be sure to put some money in the offering plate.' The options are complete obedience to the one who created us or meaninglessness. There is nothing in between.

In chapter 9 Keller observes that in Psalm 51 David teaches us that fear of God's punishment may restrain our sin for a time, but our hearts will remain untransformed:

You will never experience true change if you simply say to God, 'Lord I was bad because I committed adultery. I broke the seventh commandment, so I know you're going to punish me. O Lord please have mercy on me.' With that approach you may end up hating yourself, but you will not end up hating your sin.

What is required, writes Keller, is the attitude shown by David when he says: 'Lord I see I've trampled on you, and I don't care what the consequences are. You are just in your judging. What I want is to love you and honour you and be right with you again.' This type of repentance 'focuses on God and makes him the end you are seeking. This approach, in contrast to the other, will make you hate your sin without making you hate yourself.'

Martin's opinion:

What is Wrong with the World? is a clear, comprehensive and challenging study of the nature of sin and how we can be saved from it through the grace of God. It is a book that Christians need to read in order to realise what sin really is and their need to turn to God for healing from it. And it is a book that Christians can confidently give to enquirers who want to know what the Christian faith teaches about sin and why it matters. This is also a book that would make an excellent basis for a sermon series or for a group bible study. Highly recommended.

Commendations:

Allyn Bock comments:

Keller's approach in these sermons is more like a biography of sin than a systematic theology. The exploration of the various biblical metaphors will benefit even seasoned students of Scripture. Yet this short book's accessibility and practicality will open Keller's thinking to new audiences, who might have been daunted by some of his other books. In *What Is Wrong with the World?*, Keller offers hope and clarity for those who feel uprooted by the evil in this world.

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christmas: A Journalist Investigates the Identity of the Child in the Manger*, Zondervan, ISBN 978-0-31037-103-8, £3.99 (e book edition also available).

Overview:

Lee Strobel is a former award-winning journalist, who has become a best-selling Christian apologist. Following on from his previous books *The Case for Christ* and *The Case for a Creator*, *The Case for Christmas* (which is a fully revised and updated version of a book first published in 2005) is a work of popular apologetics that explains why the evidence points to the reliability of the biblical account of the virgin birth of Christ and why this matters today.

The book begins with Strobel explaining how he came to write the book:

I began to probe the real meaning of those nativity scenes I would see outside churches. I wanted to answer the most consequential question of history: *Who was really in the manger that first Christmas?*

What I found thoroughly fascinated me. I expected to discover that Christmas is built on flimsy legends that developed in the many decades or even centuries after Jesus lived. I thought the virgin birth would be exposed as a fanciful idea plagiarised from earlier mythology. I didn't anticipate that the opposite would happen – that a thorough investigation of ancient history would validate the Christmas narrative, based on reliable sources that are too immediate to be written off as mere legend and make believe.

Turn the page and I'll share some of what I've learnt. It's a journey that I am convinced will stimulate your mind, warm your heart, satisfy your soul... and forever change the way you celebrate Christmas. It really is, after all, the greatest story in history – and, as you know, the greatest stories are the ones that turn out to be true.

After the Introduction the book consists of five chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter one, 'Setting the record straight', explains what Luke teaches about the birth of Christ, namely that he was born in a 'family room' rather than an inn and, after looking at the issues surround the historicity of the gospels, concludes that '...the historical record of the birth of Jesus must be taken seriously. The gospels are our best source about what really happened when Jesus was born to a virgin named Mary.'

Chapter two, 'The stuff of legends?' compares the accounts of the birth of Jesus with stories of miraculous births found in pagan mythologies and notes that:

The reports of Jesus' birth teachings, death and resurrection are unique because they appear in a historical context, are based on eyewitness accounts, and are recorded almost immediately after his life. They bear the earmarks of authenticity – that is, they aren't the flights of fancy found in mythological tales.

Consequently, when we celebrate Christmas, we can be confident we are commemorating the birth of the unique Son of God that came in a mission to seek and to save those who are spiritually lost.

Chapter three, 'Why the Virgin Birth makes sense,' argues that the virgin birth 'makes it possible for Jesus to be both fully God and fully man' and also 'makes it possible for Jesus to be born without original sin.' Furthermore, it is entirely possible for the creator God to miraculously provide the Y chromosome necessary for Jesus to be a human male.

Chapter four, 'How the Messianic prophecies point to Jesus,' explains why the prophecies in Micah 5:2 and 4 and Isaiah 7:14–17 point forward to the birth of Jesus the Messiah from a virgin in Bethlehem.

Chapter five, 'Seven intriguing questions about Christmas' looks at whether Jesus was born on 25 December, the identity of the Magi, the nature of the star of Bethlehem, the credibility of the slaughter of the infants by Herod, why Luke was correct about the census that meant Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem, why it is not offensive to write Xmas because the letter X is an ancient symbol for Christ and his cross, and the fact that the real Santa Claus was the early Christian bishop St. Nicholas, a man renowned for his Christian kindness and generosity.

Finally, the concluding chapter, 'The real reason for the season,' emphasises that 'the real purpose of birth of Jesus is the death and resurrection of Jesus' and urges people who do not yet believe to accept the gift of eternal life God

offers through Jesus, and for Christians to be willing to talk about that same gift to their friends and neighbours during the Christmas holidays.

Martin's opinion:

The Case for Christmas is an excellent introduction to the key issues surrounding the birth of Jesus. It draws on reliable scholarship but mediates the results of this scholarship in a very readable fashion. It can be strongly recommended for Christians who want to understand this part of their faith better, for enquirers who want to know what Christians believe about the nature and significance of the birth of Jesus and those beginning their theological studies who want a user-friendly introduction to the issues they will need to go on to look at in more detail.

Miroslav Volf, *The Cost of Ambition: How Striving to Be Better Than Others Makes Us Worse*, Baker, ISBN 978-1-58743-481-5, £18.99 (e book and audio editions also available).

Overview:

The Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf is Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School and founding director of the Yale Centre for Faith and Culture in New Haven, Connecticut. He has written or edited more than two dozen books, including *Life Worth Living*, *A Public Faith*, *Public Faith in Action*, and *Exclusion and Embrace*.

The basis for his new book *The Cost of Ambition* is Volf's conviction that 'It takes only a quick perusal through the Bible to see that striving for superiority is a dominant theme in the story of human suffering and wrongdoing.' He cites as examples the rivalry between Cain and Abel in Genesis 4:1–6 and the way that people are led astray by the supposed superiority of the beast in Revelation 13:4.

As Volf sees it, the quest for superiority and the fear of inferiority are inseparably linked together:

We oscillate between 'I am better than some, maybe even most' and 'Everybody is better than me – or at least everyone who matters.' Behind the oscillation is an unstated conviction: 'I must be at least better than most – beyond average – or I am inadequate, a loser, nothing. And still further back behind that conviction is yet another: 'My worth derives from how I stack up against others. I *am* how I stack up against others.'

In his book Volf draws on the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, John Milton and the apostle Paul, plus the teaching of Scripture as whole, to show that while striving for excellence is a good thing, striving for superiority over others is not, and that it is:

... possible to break out of the self-reinforcing oscillation between the sense of inferiority and striving for superiority, wrest our self-worth from captivity to comparisons with others, and live confidently out of a well of living water at the bedrock of our souls undaunted by how we stack up against others.

At the end of his book, Volf summarises the overall argument of his book in the following five points:

1. '... to live in true freedom and with joy – we must give up on striving for superiority. Each of us is glorious by simply being human. God gives us each both being and glory by bringing us into existence as a unique specimen of humanity.'
2. 'The standing of any person in community is exactly equal to the standing of any other; there are no superior and inferior members. Superior and inferior worth or status are social fictions.'
3. 'It is the call of our very being to live into and enact in the world our own particular glory as God's unique and irreplaceable creature. This is an invitation to striving, to zeal even. But in this striving, it does not matter how we stack up against others. Others are not our measures, though they can be our inspirations or warnings. The measure of excellence is Jesus Christ. And he is also the guarantee of our future excellence.'
4. 'One of the most revolutionary injunctions in the New Testament... is that each person in a community should treat all others as if they were superior to themselves, superior not in achievement but in importance. Obedience to this injunction is likely the best way to subvert striving for superiority and the resulting hierarchies of honour.'
5. 'The practise of treating others as superior to us... reflects the very character of God... In Jesus Christ, as the Nicene Creed puts it, the one 'through whom all things were made... came down' – and became a servant, even of the humblest of humans, so as to elevate them all to his own kind of glory.'

Martin's opinion:

The Cost of Ambition is an enormously important and timely book. We live in a world in which the idea that we must strive to achieve superiority over others is ubiquitous. The heroes in our world are those who are perceived to have achieved superiority in some way, whether in business, sport, politics, the media, or in some other sphere of life. Even in the Church certain people are treated as if some are superior and others inferior. What Volf shows is that this whole idea of dividing the world into superiors and inferiors is a harmful falsehood and that the Christian faith shows us a

better way by teaching us that all of us as God's creatures have equal glory, and that the excellence which is God's gift and calling involves among other things humbling ourselves and learning to treat others as more important than ourselves. This a heavy-weight academic book and not everyone will be up to reading it, but those who are up to reading it should do so and should then share its vital message with others.

Commendations:

Robert Emmons declares:

This book does not disappoint. Miroslav Volf has always written compellingly and convincingly as he diagnoses the human condition. In *The Cost of Ambition*, he guides the reader through the origins of the pervasive yet misguided need to prove one's superiority and the multitude of problems that such striving creates. Simultaneously humane and scholarly, psychologically astute and theologically sound, Volf suggests that deliverance from this predicament can only come from the proper recognition of the generosity of the glorious and gifting God, ultimately exchanging the enslaving and empty striving for superiority with freedom and fullness in Christ's accomplishments for us and God's superiority in relation to us.