

Latimer Trust

Monthly Reading List – September 2020

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
Matthew Barrett	<i>None Greater – The Undomesticated Attributes of God</i>	This is a book which clergy ought read themselves to refresh their own understanding of what God is like, but also a book which they should make their lay people aware of and which they should encourage them to read.
Rod Dreher	<i>Live Not by Lies – A Manual for Christian Dissidents</i>	Christians in this country need to prepare themselves for the 'long resistance' and to learn from the Soviet bloc dissidents about how to do this. A book that all thinking Christians concerned about the future of the faith in Western society need to read.
Peter Maiden	<i>Radical Gratitude: Recalibrating Your Heart in an Age of Entitlement</i>	This important book shows theologically why Christians should be humble, grateful, and contented people and it contains many helpful practical suggestions about how to cultivate humility, gratitude and contentment.
Amy Orr Ewing	<i>Where Is God in All the Suffering?</i>	This is a book which Christians should buy as a resource for their own thinking and as a resource they can lend or give away to serious enquirers for whom the issue of suffering is a stumbling block to their coming to faith.
Graham Tomlin	<i>Why Being Yourself is a Bad Idea: And Other Countercultural Notions</i>	This is an excellent work of Christian apologetics. It challenges the common assumption that Christianity has nothing to say to people today, by showing how Christian belief in God, the incarnation, and the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection, answers the basic questions people today still have about the nature of human existence and what it means to live well.

Matthew Barrett, *None Greater – The Undomesticated Attributes of God*, Baker Books, ISBN 978-0-8010-9874-1, £11.99 (e book and audio versions also available).

Overview:

Dr Matthew Barrett is associate professor of Christian theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, as well as the founder and executive editor of *Credo Magazine* and the host of the *Credo Podcast*. He is the author of a number of books on doctrine and historical theology.

The starting point for his new book *None Greater* is the observation that:

.... there are very few books on the attributes of God written for those in the church in a style that is clear and accessible yet uncompromising and rigorous. While stacks of books invite the scholarly student to pick up and read, the churchgoer has little opportunity to dive headfirst into the deep things of God. Sadly, they turn to popular devotional literature to feed a spiritual hunger that only theology can satisfy. Is it any wonder that our churches have a big heart for ministry but look almost anemic when asked about the big God we claim to worship?

To make matters worse, that gaping hole is all too eagerly filled by liberal theologians. The last two centuries have demonstrated that the modern and postmodern person is quick to substitute a God who is like us, a God we can domesticate, for the high view of God affirmed by figures like Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. The parable of the unclean spirits applies: when bad theology is cast out by one generation but not replaced with a substitute by the next, the home of Christian theology is left empty. When that bad spirit of theology returns and finds the home empty, it brings with it seven more unclean theologies. The last state is worse than the first (Matt. 12:45). Such is our heritage.

In the face of this situation:

This book is meant to fill the house with good theology proper, the type that will keep the demons away for good. That means dispensing with the modern theologian's agenda to create a God in our own image, a God whose immanence has swallowed his transcendence, a God that can be controlled by the creature because he is not that different from the creature. But it also means filling the house with a biblical understanding of God as one who is, as Isaiah said, "high and lifted up" (Isa. 6:1), whose attributes remain undomesticated. He is the God Jeremiah confessed, saying, There is none like you, O Lord; You are great, and your name is great in might. (Jer. 10:6) There is none greater than this God, not because he is merely a greater version of ourselves but because he is nothing like ourselves. Only a Creator not to be confused with the creature is capable of stooping down to redeem those who have marred his image. Our "situation would surely have been hopeless," exclaims John Calvin, "had the very majesty of God not descended to us, since it was not in our power to ascend to him."

In order to 'fill the house with good theology' Barrett's book covers two topics.

The first topic is the basis of our thinking and speaking about God. Barrett covers this topic in his first two chapters. In the first chapter he explains how the greatness of God means that he necessarily exceeds human understanding and in the second chapter he explains that this means that we can only talk about God by means of analogical language that is based on God's self-revelation, and that respects the difference as well as the similarity between God and ourselves. Thus, it is true to say that God is good and wise because this is what the Bible tells, but we have to recognise that his goodness and wisdom far exceed human goodness and wisdom.

The second topic is the attributes, or characteristics, of God. He describes these attributes as 'undomesticated' because they are what make God who he is rather than a creature like us. The attributes he considers are God's perfection, aseity (self-existence), simplicity, immutability, impassibility, eternity, omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, omnisapience (unlimited wisdom), righteousness, goodness, love and jealousy.

In considering these attributes Barrett draws primarily on the Bible, showing how the attributes he is discussing are reflected in the biblical text, but he also draws on the teaching of what he calls the 'A team' of Augustine, Anselm,

and Aquinas, and the work of other theologians from the history of the Church such as John Calvin, Stephen Charnock and Herman Bavinck, and more recent writers such as C S Lewis, Katharin Rogers and Thomas Weinandy.

The overall message of the book is that the account of God given by the 'A team' and other theologians who have also taught what Barrett calls 'classical theism' is the one that Christians ought to accept for the simple reason that 'the God of classical theism is simply the God of the Bible.'

Martin's opinion:

This book is an excellent example of what C S Lewis famously called 'Mere Christianity' in that it expounds the view of God that has historically been held by all orthodox theologians in all branches of the Church down the centuries and across the world. If anyone wants a good introduction to this view of God, then Barrett's book is a great place to start. As we have noted, Barrett's target readership is ordinary churchgoers rather than professional theologians, and it is written in a clear, readable and non-technical style that will make it accessible to the ordinary reasonably well-educated lay Christian. If they are capable of understanding serious books on, say, history, science, or politics, then they will be capable of understanding and benefitting from this book. This is a book which clergy ought read themselves to refresh their own understanding of what God is like, but also a book which they should make their lay people aware of and which they should encourage them to read.

Commendations:

Carl Trueman has written:

Matthew Barrett's excellent book lays out in clear, accessible terms what the biblical, historic, ecumenical doctrine of God is, why it matters, and why its abandonment by great swathes of the Protestant world is something that needs correction.

Rod Dreher, *Live Not by Lies – A Manual for Christian Dissidents*, Penguin Random House, ISBN 978-05-93087-39-8, £21.04.

Overview:

Rod Dreher is an American Roman Catholic writer and political commentator who is senior editor for *The American Conservative* magazine. His best-selling book *The Benedict Option* looked at how Christians should prepare themselves to live in a post-Christian culture. His new book *Live Not by Lies* develops the same theme further, arguing that Christians in the United States need to prepare themselves to live faithfully for God in a coming 'soft-totalitarian' future.

As he sees it 'totalitarianism' exists when an authoritarian government expands its claim to power to cover every aspect of life – including the inner life of its citizens.

In a 'hard totalitarian' state, like Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, the government attempts to enforce its claim to power through the use of terror and pain, the secret police and the gulags.

In Dreher's view, the United States is not heading towards that kind of hard totalitarianism. As he sees it, what emigres from the old Soviet bloc are correct in saying is that what is emerging in the United States is a social system that is totalitarian, but in a gentler and kinder way. The institutions of liberal democracy will remain intact and there will be no state monopoly on power, and people will be induced to accept the prevailing secular liberal ideology not through terror and pain, but through a desire for comfort and status. On this scenario the future will be more like the world of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* than the world of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, but it will still be totalitarian and it will still aim to wipe out all dissent, including orthodox Christianity.

The purpose of Dreher's book is to warn about the coming of this soft totalitarianism and to explore what the example of Christian dissidents from the old Soviet bloc countries has to tell about how to maintain Christian resistance within a totalitarian system. According to Dreher, they tell us that Christians need to

.... start right now forming small groups of trusted people we can count on. We should begin educating ourselves about real history, real art, real literature – this, as opposed to the politically correct propaganda versions. Parents need to make sure their families are strong, and that they are teaching their children the importance of living in truth, not conforming to have an easy life.

Most of all, we need to learn how to suffer. Over and over again, in the testimonies of those who endured persecution, I learned that the ability to suffer for one's faith, and for the truth, was the key factor in what got them through the terrible trial of totalitarianism. We middle-class American Christians have been raised in a shallow, feelgood form of the faith – and it will not be enough to sustain us when the persecution starts.

The title of Dreher's book is taken from an essay by the Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who famously said that one of the biggest mistakes people make is assuming totalitarianism can't happen in their country. Dreher thinks that many Christians are making that mistake today, sleepwalking through the erosion of their freedoms. *Live Not by Lies* is an attempt to wake them up and equip them for the long resistance.

Martin's opinion:

Although the focus of Dreher's book is what is happening in the United States, his warning about the coming of a soft form of totalitarianism arguably applies equally well to what is happening in this country. A liberal, secular ideology is becoming the prevailing official dogma in this country as well and those who dissent from it are finding that their life is becoming increasingly difficult. To get ahead in this country you need to 'get with the programme' as David Cameron once said, and the programme is one that has little room for the theology and ethics of orthodox Christianity.

Because things don't look like they are going to get better any time soon, Christians in this country, as in the United States, need to prepare themselves for the 'long resistance' and to learn from the Soviet bloc dissidents about how to do this. The importance of Dreher's book is that, drawing on the lessons these dissidents have to teach, it provides a 'how to' manual for undertaking such resistance. For this reason it is a book that all thinking Christians concerned about the future of the faith in Western society need to read.

Commendations:

Daniel Mahoney comments:

As a new cultural revolution aims to institutionalize a tyranny of ideological clichés, Dreher renews Solzhenitsyn's great call to 'live not by lies.' I cannot imagine a more timely and urgent book, or one with a more enduring spiritual, political, and cultural message.

Peter Maiden, *Radical Gratitude: Recalibrating Your Heart in an Age of Entitlement*, IVP, ISBN 978-1-78974-185-8, £9.99 (e edition also available).

Overview:

Peter Maiden, who died in July this year, was International Director Emeritus for Operation Mobilization and was also Minister-at-large for Keswick Ministries.

The subject matter of his final book is summed up in its subtitle 'Recalibrating Your Heart in an Age of Entitlement.' What his book is about is why we need to change our hearts from the attitude of entitlement that is prevalent in our culture, and even in the Church, to an attitude of thanksgiving, and how we can go about doing so.

In the introduction to his book Maiden recalls how the serious illness of his son revealed to him that he was in the grip of an 'entitled way of thinking' which said to God 'I have done this for you. I expect a response, a return on my investment.'

In chapter 1 Maiden reflects on the fact that in the Western world we live in a culture that is dominated by this sense of entitlement, and explains the reason why Christians should be different from our culture in this respect.

We are not entitled to an easy ride. God has made no such promises to us. He has promised to us just what he promised to Jacob: I will be with you; I will fulfil all my purposes and promises and, eventually, in my time, I will deliver you. It is high time to stop thinking entitlement and to start thinking gift, privilege and grace. Thanksgiving and praise will then begin to flow from our lives.

In chapters 2 and 3 Maiden goes on to expound the basis for an attitude of thankfulness. He notes that we should always be thankful because we have been blessed by God with an abundance of blessings which we did not deserve and which will last for eternity, and because our lives and everything of value that we enjoy are gifts to us from 'a good and generous God.'

In chapter 4 Maiden notes how the story of Jesus' healing of the ten lepers in Luke 17:11–19, the biblical teaching about the fall of Lucifer, and the account of the ingratitude and unbelief of the people of Israel in Numbers 14:1–4 warn us against dishonouring God through the vice of ingratitude. In chapter 5 he goes on to explain that in order to counter ingratitude we need to develop a 'holy habit' of deliberate and disciplined gratitude. Gratitude, he writes:

... is a deliberate choice we must make; it is the overflow of letting the word of Christ dwell in our hearts and resisting the suggestions of Satan. As we develop this godly habit, it can pervade everything we do; we can only imagine the joy that we will experience and the praise of God that will result.

In chapter 6 Maiden urges the importance of developing 'rhythms of remembering' in which we stop and reflect on God's goodness to us. In chapter 7 he looks at how the remembrance of what Christ did for us on the cross is the antidote to pride and the key to developing a habit of thankfulness:

It is at the cross that I find the great antidote to any foolish pride. Here, I see myself truly, as Jesus bears my sin and curse and pays the debt that I could never pay. Here, I can have no inflated views of myself, for I am cut down to size. I see that, without Christ, I am nothing and, without his sacrifice forever lost. If I can learn to live in the shadow of the cross then the habit of thankfulness will be sure to result.

In chapter 8 Maiden explores how our belief in God's sovereignty leads to 'a life of grateful trust in God's fatherly care' that is an antidote to a life of 'constant worry' and in chapter 9 he considers how we need to cultivate an attitude of contentment based on God's sovereignty and what he has done for us in Christ, and how building in times of stillness and solitude in which we recall God's 'faithfulness and goodness' can help us to develop this attitude.

In chapter 10 Maiden looks at how gratitude can be a weapon which enables us to prevail in the spiritual battles in which we are involved and in chapter 11 he explores how the book of Habakkuk teaches us about 'the patient waiting, the quiet trust and the long look' that will enable gratitude and thanksgiving even in the midst of times of lament.

Finally, in chapter 12 Maiden shares how he has discovered new reasons to be thankful in the context of a diagnosis of incurable cancer and has learned afresh in this situation that:

I'm secure in God, in his covenant faithfulness, in his sovereign grace and in his omnipotent power. The security is not in me or my faithfulness but in his. Indeed, his faithfulness is my only hope to keep me faithful to the end.

At the end of all but one of the chapters there is a reflection on a Psalm that underscores the message in that chapter. The exception is chapter 5 which has a series of suggestions for how to 'develop a habit of gratitude in your life.'

Martin's opinion:

Radical Gratitude is an important book. It shows theologically why Christians should be humble, grateful, and contented people and it contains many helpful practical suggestions about how to cultivate humility, gratitude and contentment. It is also a book that is not just full of abstract theology, but is instead rooted in numerous real-life examples.

This is a book which clergy should encourage their congregations to read and which would make a great basis for a sermon series or for a series of home group sessions.

Commendations:

Jonathan Lamb writes:

With profound sincerity and simplicity, this inspirational book teaches us the vital importance of a grateful heart. Replacing the proud self-sufficiency and grumbling anxiety of our age, we discover the secret of quiet trust and joyful contentment. Through moving personal testimony and lively Biblical examples, Peter points us to a way of life which rejoices in God's fatherly care, trusts his sovereign control and daily enjoys his gracious provision. A hugely refreshing, encouraging and life-changing read!

Amy Orr Ewing, *Where Is God in All the Suffering?*, The Good Book Company, ISBN 978-1784982768, £7.99 (e edition also available).

Overview:

Dr Amy Orr Ewing is a theologian and apologist, who is the Co-Director of The Oxford Centre of Christian Apologetics, and who has written numerous books and articles on how the Christian faith answers the deepest questions of life.

She starts her new book in the Good Book Company's 'questioning faith' series by reflecting on the way in which the theological issue of where God is in the midst of suffering is raised by the specific instances of suffering which we all encounter in the course of our lives and has been raised in a new way by the advent of COVID-19.

As I write this, my dear friend Brenda has just died. She was 36 and leaves a husband and three children, the youngest of whom is a five-month-old baby. A few days ago I walked behind her casket into her funeral service, carrying her baby girl in my arms. I find myself asking: is there any hope in this seemingly hopeless situation? Is there any comfort for a daughter who will grow up not remembering her mother? Is there a loving God who could pour his love and comfort into our grieving hearts? Is God really there in all our pain and heartache over loss?

Right now I find myself working at home during a government lockdown, in isolation with my family. The death toll from COVID-19 climbs daily. We have all been shocked to discover how vulnerable and helpless we are against a microbial virus that has taken loved ones, closed borders, shops and restaurants, and halted the economy of half the planet. Where is God in the fear, suffering and grief of this global pandemic?

She begins to answer the questions raised in these paragraphs by looking in chapter 1 at the different explanations for the existence of suffering offered by Eastern philosophy (it's the result of Karma), by Islam (it's the result of the operation of fate) and naturalism (it's meaningless). She then explains that the Christian faith offers a different approach.

The Christian faith understands darkness and suffering as having come into the world as a direct result of our human exercise of moral choice. And so suffering is real: it hurts. And it really hurts because we are more than our biochemistry; we are not here by accident. Human life has a transcendent source, we are bearers of the image of God, and in some deep way we sense this in ourselves and others, even those we will never know intimately – even if we don't believe in God. Christian faith understands life to be precious at an ultimate level, and that means that it will matter at the deepest level when will others are in pain. This might help us understand why the human experience of pain is so acute.

As we will see in the following chapters, love, relationship and freedom are not only intrinsically connected in the Christian story; they framed the universal human experience of pain. But in the Christian story there is more to be discovered because we are introduced to a God who is *with us* in pain, a suffering God, a God who is *for us* in pain.

In the following seven chapters she then goes on to look at specific forms of suffering in the light of the Christian approach she has just sketched out, looking at how it provides a helpful perspective from which to address the question of where God is in anger, grief, illness, mental illness, violence, natural disasters and systemic pain.

She argues that suffering is intrinsically linked to the existence of choice and love and that physical pain is the consequence of living in a fallen world. She acknowledges that it is true that God does heal some people and not others, but contends that it is not true to infer from this that he is not loving or that he doesn't exist. She also looks at the ways in which God uses his people to alleviate the pain and suffering of others and highlights the fact that the Bible insists that those who inflict unjust suffering on others will ultimately God as their judge and receive a just punishment for their behaviour.

In her ninth chapter she considers how and why God took suffering upon himself in the person of Jesus so that we might have a personal relationship with him and might one day live in a world in which suffering and death are no more.

In her concluding chapter she re-iterates that both the Christian story and Christian experience shows that

God can be found, known and experienced in the midst of pain through his own suffering.

Ultimately at the heart of the Christian faith is the author of relationship with a personal God who is not a system or a machine but a loving Father. A God who entered this suffering world in Jesus Christ, and suffered and died not only with us but for us. Through his suffering, he can offer us redemption, forgiveness, safety and community. His comfort, strength and truth in our struggles and in our pain point us towards a hope-filled future: a home with him beyond the grave where we can be with him, comforted and loved enjoying eternity beyond the reach of pain.

Martin's opinion:

This book is a very helpful introduction to the issues which it covers. It employs a helpful combination of philosophical and theological arguments and personal stories and by means of this combination shows in a clear and accessible fashion that the existence of suffering is not a compelling argument against the existence of a God of love and justice, but that on the contrary believing in the God who has made himself known through Jesus Christ gives us a perspective that enables us to make sense of why suffering exists, inspires us to take what action we can to mitigate suffering in the present, and gives us hope that suffering will cease to exist in the future.

This is a book which Christians should buy as a resource for their own thinking and as a resource they can lend or give away to serious enquirers for whom the issue of suffering is a stumbling block to their coming to faith.

Commendations:

John Lennox comments:

This book arises out of the conviction of the author that if the Christian faith is worth considering, it needs to be deep enough to cope with our most rigorous human scrutiny and our most heart-rending questions. Amy is not afraid to address the "why" questions, and that of suffering and pain is the hardest of all for any of us. With a sympathetic heart and a probing, honest mind, she helps the reader think through a wide range of causes of our pain and distress, and introduces us to the incomparable grace of the Good Shepherd, who himself suffered and gave his life for the sheep. A book to be read and shared – especially in this time of global pain.

Graham Tomlin, *Why Being Yourself is a Bad Idea: And Other Countercultural Notions*, SPCK, ISBN 978-0-28108-179-0, £9.99 (e edition also available).

Overview:

Dr Graham Tomlin is the Bishop of Kensington. He is the author of a number of books on church history, historical theology, ministry and mission. In his new book he sets out how Christian belief relates to the experience of being human in the twenty-first century.

In chapter 1, 'Why 'being yourself' is a bad idea,' Tomlin notes that Western society has increasingly turned away from God and has embraced a cult of the self, 'consumerist individualism,' in which the aim of life is for individuals to live the way they see fit. In the face of this cult of the self, and the problems it raises for individuals, for society and the well-being of the planet, he raises the question:

What if we find our true selves not by looking within but by being drawn out of ourselves by something outside? In the spring, as the sun begins to warm the air and the earth, you begin to see barren land sprout flowers and bare branches are soon covered with leaves. The warmth of the sun brings out the hidden potential lying deep in the sap of the trees or the seeds planted deep in the soil. A tree in summer has become its true glorious self (if we can put it like this) not by regenerating itself from within but by being drawn out by the sun as it sheds its light and heat. Maybe we too become our true selves by turning not inwards but outwards, towards a source of life that is constant, steady, waiting for us to turn in its direction?

In chapter 2, 'Why wonder is the beginning of wisdom,' he notes how our experience of wonder at our own existence and the existence of the world raises the question of the existence of God. This is because, as we ponder why the world is as it is, we discover that:

... the universe does not explain itself. Something simply cannot emerge out of nothing. There is a vast ontological distance between something (however small, simple and insignificant) and nothing, so a purely physical, materialist explanation of our existence doesn't make sense. The ultimate source of our existence cannot lie in some event or even person that kicked it all off in the first place and then is no longer needed – some ancient ancestor perhaps – because that event or person would require some explanation. As G K Chesterton once said, the materialist view of the world imagines 'an ever-increasing flood of water pouring out of an empty jug.'

This discovery then raises the question:

Might it be, after all, that there is something, or Someone, on the other side of all that we see around us, beyond all the fragile, normal reality that we experience every day? Contingent things cannot be explained by other contingent things; they can only be explained by something entirely different – something *necessary*. Something that cannot not be.

In chapter 3, 'Why love is and isn't all you need,' Tomlin notes that 'the need to love and to be loved lies at the heart of our humanity' and that this raises the issue of whether:

...it is the ability to turn outwards towards the person who happens to be next to you right now, rather than inwards towards your own desires, that is the secret of true life and happiness? The capacity to ignore the nagging voice inside, the whining self that always wants its ego stroked, its needs instantly satisfied and, instead, to think yourself into what your neighbour needs, may turn out to be the secret of contentment after all. Maybe the route to true flourishing lies on the paradoxical path of self-denial not self-discovery?

Furthermore, he says:

If love is central to our experience of being human, then what might this tell us about the God who could be hidden, waiting for us behind what we see around us? And how would we ever find out what he is like?

In chapter 4, 'Why the Big Bang has a face' Tomlin introduces what the New Testament tells us about Jesus and explains that in the light of what it says about him:

Christians believe that it is in the face of Jesus that we see the love that created the world perfectly expressed in human flesh and blood. It is The Big Bang with a face and a name. If you tried to put God, the creator of the world, into an ordinary human life cover this is what it would look like. It's what it did look like. This was not one of the regular appearances of divine beings in mortal form, the staple of many Greek myths, but the God behind the gods, the mysterious source of everything that exists, appearing before their very eyes, no longer invisible but the visible 'image of the invisible God.'

He then further notes that:

If Jesus really is the vital clue to the character of the God who made the world, then the power that brought the universe into being, the driving energy of the universe that runs through the world like the words through a stick of rock, is none other than love.

If the world was born out of love, it explains why we so badly need love and why we thrive in its presence and shrivel in its absence.

In chapter 5, 'Why evil exists and why it can't be explained,' Tomlin considers the three major approaches to the existence of evil, that it is result of the exercise of free will, that it is there to provide an opportunity for our growing into maturity, and that evil can never be explained because its very nature as the absence of good means that it is essentially irrational.

He then goes on to explain that:

Christians don't believe in God because they have solved the problem of evil. It's just that they have discovered something that stands over against the problem and makes them believe anyway.

Over against the enigma of evil, we get the assurance as we are invited to look at the face, the hands, the life, the death and resurrection of Jesus, that God is good after all, that he has conquered evil and will one day eradicate it once and for all. That is why Christians believe, because it gives them hope.

In chapter 6, 'Why justice matters and why we don't really want it,' Tomlin argues that the human instinct for justice inevitably points us not just to the wrongdoing of others, but also to our own shortcomings. This in turn raises the question of what we can do about them. The Christian answer, says Tomlin, is that:

We can learn to love. And that is what Christianity is all about. Yet learning to love is no simple matter. Old habits die hard. Something more radical has to happen in us before we can begin to make progress.

In chapter 7, 'Why everyone needs an identity crisis,' Tomlin explains that the radical thing that needs to happen has happened in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The death and resurrection of Jesus speaks to both the villain and victim in all of us; the parts where we have sinned and the parts where we have been sinned against; the parts where we are the perpetrators of evil and the parts where we are its victims. There is nothing that we can suffer that puts us beyond the reach of the love of God and there is nothing we can do that puts us beyond the reach of the forgiveness of God.

Being a Christian means being transformed by this truth and by the promise that:

... the moment of death will, in fact, be a gateway into something much richer and greater, the fulfilment of all our best hopes and longings in this life, leaving behind their desires that destroy and, instead enjoying the very presence of the God who made us.

In Chapter 8, 'Freedom is not what you think it is,' Tomlin suggests that rather than accepting the 'libertarian' view of freedom as freedom to do what we like, we should instead accept that:

Freedom is not freedom from other people, the independence to go our way and to be ourselves. It is the freedom from anything that would stop us becoming the kind of person capable of love for God and our neighbour. It is freedom from pride, envy and greed, not the freedom to indulge them. It is freedom from the anxious, fearful isolation that comes when we pretend we are independent and don't need anyone else.

This kind of freedom is not only better for individuals, but also for society as a whole.

In chapter 9, 'Why praying is dangerous,' Tomlin explains that prayer is not just about experiencing God, or seeking to change things by asking for divine intervention, but that it is also, and more fundamentally, a way in which we allow God to change us:

As we consciously orient ourselves towards God in prayer, worship, study, fasting or any of the other disciplines of the spiritual life, we find the Holy Spirit opening us up, reversing that 'turned-in' nature, warming us in shaping our new selves.

True prayer will draw you deeper into the places of pain in the world. It might make you leave your job. It might cause you to volunteer to visit a prison, a homeless centre or a food bank.

Prayer will make your heart soft. Hard hearts are sometimes easier to live with, as they don't get broken, whereas soft ones do. Prayer is dangerous. But worth it.

In chapter 10, 'Why we can't live alone,' Tomlin explains the importance of the Church, noting that:

Rather than being a boring way to spend a Sunday morning, is in fact, the frontline of resistance to all that destroys life and love. It is a worldwide movement, expressed in small local communities to help us play our part in God's resistance to all that destroys life.

The church is a place where you go to learn how to do all this – to love yourself, to love God, to love your neighbour and love your enemy.

In an appendix, 'What do I do now?' Tomlin gives a list of suggestions for those who want to explore Christianity further after reading his book.

Martin's opinion:

Why Being Yourself is a Bad Idea is an excellent work of Christian apologetics. It challenges the common assumption that Christianity has nothing to say to people today, by showing how Christian belief in God, the incarnation, and the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection, answers the basic questions people today still have about the nature of human existence and what it means to live well. It also shows helpfully where prayer and the Church fit into the picture.

Like Amy Orr Ewing's book on God and suffering, Tomlin's book is one which Christians should buy as a resource for their own thinking and as a resource they can lend or give away to serious enquirers. Highly recommended.

Commendations:

James Mumford declares:

Most books about religion are boring. This one isn't. It is intriguing and provocative, speaking to our deepest concerns and heaviest questions. In beautiful prose and with a wide range of reference, Graham Tomlin unpacks a whole world... and it is a spacious and attractive one. This exposition of faith in the twenty-first century arrives at a simplicity the far side of complexity. The book is a real gift.