BOOKS I HAVE READ: HERE ARE YOUR GODS

Posted on September 7, 2020 by Eddie

Category: Observations

Whatever one might say about how difficult the year 2020 has been, lots of good books have been published. I've already suggested that two different books are the best book that I will read all year and in any other year, Here are Your Gods by Chris Wright would be a contender for that title, too. Subtitled "Faithful discipleship in idolatrous times" it is a thoughtful and prophetic book which should be widely read. I suspect that it will also upset a lot of people and will garner the author a fair bit of flack. We owe him a debt for putting his head above the parapet.

For me, one of the highlights of the 2010 Lausanne meeting in Cape Town was a presentation that Chris Wright gave on the subject of idolatry; you can watch the video below.

Here are Your God's is a normal-sized paperback of just over 170 pages including endnotes and a Scripture index. It is relatively short and is pitched at a level which will be accessible to any regular reader. It is due to be released at the end of this month and will set you back around eight quid for the paperback or a Kindle copy.

One might be tempted to ask why a blog about mission would review a book on idolatry; the opening passage gives an explanation:

> *Monotheism and mission. Two vast words that you will not actually find in the Bible, yet they embrace massive biblical teaching: that there is only one true living God, the God revealed as Yahweh in the Old Testament and incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth in the New; and that this God revealed in the Bible is on mission, that is to say, he is working out his own sovereign plan and purpose for the whole creation through the whole of human history and calls his whole redeemed people to participate with him in that mission.*
>
> *Each of these words, monotheism and mission, is inseparably tied to the other.*
>
> *Biblical monotheism is necessarily missional. That is because the one true living God of the biblical revelation wills to be known and worshipped throughout his whole creation and by all the nations of humanity. That divine will to be known constitutes and generates the mission of God, through biblical history and to the end of human history.*
>
> *And biblical mission is necessarily monotheistic. That is because Godâ€™s people are commissioned to call people of all nations to the worship of this one living Creator and Redeemer God, and to join all creation in giving this one God the praise and glory that is due to him alone.*
>
> *p.9*

One of the things that I always appreciate about Chris' writing is his ability to draw links like this and to explain them clearly.

The book itself (which is a reworking of material which has appeared elsewhere) is in three parts.

Part one: The Lord God and Other Gods in The Bible deals with a biblical view of idolatry. These four chapters helpfully address one of the questions that has bothered me: are the "other Gods" mentioned in the Old Testament something?

> *In other words, it is not impossible, theologically or in ordinary discourse, to answer the question â€œAre other gods something or nothing?â€ with the paradox â€œBoth.â€ They are nothing in relation to Yahweh; they are something in relation to their worshipers.*
>
> *p.15*

Part two; Political Idolatry Now and Then brings the Bible story to bear on questions of politics and nationalism. This section has both a historic and a contemporary angle as he gets to grips with the issues of nationalism in the world of Brexit and Make America Great. Not many punches are pulled!

The final part: God's People in an Idolatrous World looks at how Christians should live in this world. We are to be shaped by the Bible's story, not by our culture's and our responsibility is to follow Jesus and not our society's idols.

At times, the parts one and two are trenchant in their criticism of current politicians and their policies. It doesn't always make comfortable reading and I suspect that some people will take exception to what he says. That being said, I don't always agree with the position that Chris takes on various issues, but I must take on board the criticisms that he levels. It is vitally important that we all examine the motivations and rationale for the positions that we take on political issues. If we only read people we agree with and who criticise those we don't like, we will never learn. Likewise, if you react viscerally to his criticisms of those you follow politically, you need to ask yourself some hard questions. To be honest, I think that sometimes Chris makes some generalisations which are not entirely fair; but this is difficult ground to tread and it is more important that I examine myself than that I should criticise an author.

Who should read this book? You should! This is particularly the case if you are strongly politically

engaged or committed to one party or another (in whichever context you find yourself).

As ever, a selection of quotes:

> *Only rarely do Old Testament texts connect the worship of other gods with demons, but the rarity should not lead us to overlook that the connection was made, for it was certainly picked up and amplified theologically in the New Testament.*
>
> *p.21*

> *Significantly, most of the references to gods and idols being the work of human hands occur in contexts where it is particularly national or state gods that are in view. For this is where the power of the gods seems strongest and where Israelâ€™s radical assertion is correspondingly most countercultural and polemical. Surely these great national gods of Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon are mighty and powerful divinities? Not so, reply the prophets; they are no more powerful than the people who make them. In making them, of course, the nations have embodied their own pride, greed, and aggression.*
>
> *p.30*

> *The most fundamental distinction in all reality is presented to us in the opening verses of the Bible. It is the distinction between the Creator God and everything else that exists anywhere. God alone is uncreated, self-existent, noncontingent. Godâ€™s being depends on nothing else outside Godâ€™s own self. All other reality, by contrast, is created by God and therefore is dependent on God for existence and sustenance. The creation is contingent on God. Creation cannot and would not exist without God. God did and could exist without creation.*
>
> *p.32*

> *Our missional motivation, therefore, needs to be carefully examined. Spiritual warfare is not a matter of triumphalism, pervaded by a horrid spirit of gloating superiority, in which we become obsessed with winning a victory. Rather, it is a matter of deep compassion for those oppressed by the forces of evil and idolatryâ€"with all their attendant social, economic, political, spiritual, and personal effects.*

p.52

All empires come to an end under the sovereign hand of God. Perhaps one reason God superintended the production of the writings that form our canon of Scripture over so many centuries is that it gave the time and space to make this lesson very clear. The whole biblical narrative takes place in the midst of the rise and fall of empires, the ebb and flow of nations and governments and whole civilizations. God allowed it to go on and allows us, the readers of the Scriptures, to trace that sequence for hundreds and hundreds of years. We watch empires rise and fall, come and go, and God seems to be saying, â€œDonâ€™t you get the point yet?â€

p.75

Can there be a sustainable future for a civilization and culture that is built on historic violence and bloodshed, that systemically increases poverty and inequality, that sets nation against nation, that corrodes the foundations of marriage and family, that desecrates Godâ€™s creation, and that devalues to the point of meaningless the very concept of public truth? Given that all of these symptoms of human fallenness receive severe condemnation in the Bible, do we not hear the Judge of all the earth saying to the Western world, â€œEnough is enoughâ€ ?

p.85

The Bible has a lot more to teach us about that realm of public life than many people thinkâ€"especially if they never read the Old Testament. There is a remarkably rich and comprehensive political, economic, and social theology and ethic in the Bible, which Western Christianity has pretty well ignored for centuries.

p.86

As we surveyed in part one, idolatry is a very important topic in the Bibleâ€"much neglected by contemporary evangelical Christians, partly because we ourselves are unconsciously involved with and sometimes dominated by the false gods of the people around us (like Old Testament Israel). Indeed, I believe that one reason for the slow but accelerating collapse of

> *Western civilization is the profoundly syncretistic and idolatrous nature of Western Christianity, combined with the idolatry of the culture that surrounds us. We, Godâ€™s people, like Israel of old, are in uncritical collusion with the false gods of our ambient cultures.*
>
> *p.94*

> *The trouble is, many Christians are simply living in the worldâ€™s story and trying to make the Bible somehow relevant to that. That is, they shape all their assumptions and decisions along the same lines that the rest of the people around us in the world doâ€"but try to add a dose of Bible gloss by â€œapplyingâ€ Bible verses here and there. We sincerely try to apply the Bible to â€œmy lifeâ€ â€"which sounds fine but actually assumes that my life is the center of reality, to which the Bible has to be somehow fitted in an adjectival way. Or sometimes, worse, we use the Bible selectively to reinforce our own personal aspirations, social and political views, or delusions.*
>
> *We have seriously lost the plotâ€"the biblical plot. We have forgotten the story we are in.*
>
> *p.112*

The nice people at IVP sent me a prepublication pdf of this book in exchange for this review. I have tried not to allow this kindness to get in the way of my views. It's an absolute cracker and if you've not bought it yet, you should!

https://youtu.be/gZ57kCNQ6oQ