BOOKS I HAVE READ: DOES THE BIBLE REALLY SAY THAT?

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An interesting, easy-to read, fascinating and sometimes controversial book. You won't agree with everything, but you should read it.
Category: Reviews

You've seen the pictures on FaceBook; a sunset, a mountain scene or some sun-dappled woodlands accompanied by some uplifting, encouraging, familiar and vaguely Christian words. From time-to-time you may have found yourself wondering, whether these well-worn tropes are actually found in the Bible. Mark Woods' latest book takes nine well-worn themes and looks at what the Bible says about them. The result is fascinating and well worth reading - though you probably wont' agree with everything he says.

First to the basic stuff;Â Does the Bible Really Say That?: Challenging Our Assumptions in the Light of ScriptureÂ is a normal format paperback that will set you back around eight pounds (less for the Kindle version). It is 150 pages long and is aimed squarely at the general reader; there are a few footnotes, but no index or bibliography.

The chapter headings (and the book cover) give an idea of the subjects under consideration:

1. God may not have a plan for your life, and that's OK
2. God doesn't heal everyone, and he doesn't want to
3. Beginning at the beginning: Why we need to talk about origins
4. Evangelism is not about saving everyone from hell
5. Forgiveness is much harder than we think
6. Spiritual growth: How the church gets in the way
7. Prayer is about God, not about us
8. How good teaching is killing good preaching
9. Church and state: Why it doesn't always have to be a battle

As you can see from the chapter headings, Mark doesn't shy away from controversy. I suspect most people reading this will have reacted strongly to one or more of the titles; scenting controversy or even heresy in the wind. The point is, that these questions are all being raised in one way or another through the platitudes of FaceBook Christianity and this book does us a favour by looking at them in more depth. I don't agree with everything that it says, but I am grateful that the questions have been brought into the open. In a world where many people seem to get their theology from social media, we need accessible books that deal with hard questions.

I don't want to look at any of the issues in depth; each chapter would merit a long blog post or three, but I'll comment on a couple of chapters and then leave you with a few quotes.

Chapter three, the one on origins will leave some people uncomfortable.Â The central argument is that by if we readÂ the opening chapters of Genesis as a text book which explains the mechanics of how God created the world weÂ will miss the central point of the narrative, which is about the nature of God himself. Genesis is not a science book and when we try to make it into one, we lose more than we gain. I've long believed that this is the key issue in the whole origins debate and it was good to see it presented in a clear, articulate fashion (by the way, I'm not going to let the comments turn

into a creation versus evolution debate).

I found myself thoroughly agreeing with the title of chapter four: "Evangelism is not about saving people from hell". I believe thatÂ the Christian life and a relationship with God are far richer than than simply escaping from damnation. However, I was uneasy with the direction that this chapter took. There was a sympathetic look at what some have called "evangelical universalism"; the notion that everyone will be saved eventually. Now, this is a current theme in theology and it needs to be discussed; however, I'm not entirely convinced that a popular book like this is the place to do it. The arguments are complex and need thrashing out in more detail than could be afforded in one short chapter.

Despite my reservations about this one chapter, I think this is a very good book. Who should read it? I would suggest that lots of people should read it, especially those whose approach to Christianity is as a tight-knit seamless intellectual system which leaves no room for doubt or questioning.Â It's good to open ourselves up to other voices.

A couple of quotes:

> *"I believe we'd be spiritually healthier if we dropped talk of God having a plan for our lives, and started talking about God having a hope for our future - a hope that's ultimately based on resurrection. God's hope for our future is about second chances, about choices and new beginnings. It's about forming us into the kind of people who make the right choices, because we've been shaped by Christian fellowship, prayer, teaching and discipline. It's about making us into people who'll be faithful in adversity, not because we believe God is deliberately testing us or inflicting pain on us for some ulterior motive, but because we believe he is able to save us to the uttermost." (p.23)*
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> *"Good preachers don't argue that something is true. They show us that its true, so powerfully that we can't deny it. It's out of these moments of transcendence that conviction comes. Of course we have to go away and test what we've heard. It may be that our conviction lasts no longer than the walk to the car park. But sometimes a meeting with God through an anointed preacher changes us for ever." (p.127)*

Disclaimer: I was given a review copy of this book by the publishers. Nevertheless, I have tried to write an honest review; if I thought it was rotten, I'd have said so.Â