

February 2012

Book Reviews

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Recommended Citation

Various Authors, . 2012. "Book Reviews." *Eleutheria* 2, (1). <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/elevol2/iss1/7>

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Book Reviews

Abstract

Review by Russell Meek of *Existential Reasons for Belief in God: A Defense of Desires and Emotions for Faith* by Clifford Williams. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011, 188 pp., \$22.00.

Review by A. Chadwick Thornhill of *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* by Scot McKnight. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011, 177pp., \$19.99 USD.

Keywords

Existential, belief, faith, God, Clifford Williams, Jesus, Gospel, Scot McKnight

Cover Page Footnote

Various authors.

Existential Reasons for Belief in God: A Defense of Desires and Emotions for Faith
by Clifford Williams. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011, 188 pp.,
\$22.00.

Christian apologetics primarily focuses on what Williams calls evidential arguments for belief in God—arguments that focus on facts, such as the “first cause” argument for God’s creation of the universe. The difficulty with these arguments, though, is that people often come to faith primarily for existential reasons (17), and there is no use arguing whether or not such a phenomenon occurs. Thus, Williams sets out to answer the question: are existential reasons for belief in God valid?

Clifford Williams holds a Ph.D. from the University of Indiana and currently teaches philosophy at Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois. He has written numerous books and articles, such as *Free Will and Determinism: A Dialogue*, *The Divided Soul: A Kierkegaardian Exploration*, and *The Wisdom of Kierkegaard: A Collection of Quotations on Faith and Life*. His extensive engagement with thinkers such as Kierkegaard makes him especially suited to bring an existential argument for belief in God to current culture.

After the introduction, Williams divides his argument into eight chapters. In chapter 2, he defines terms and explains existential needs, which comprise two categories: self-directed needs, such as the need for cosmic security, the need for meaning, and the need to be forgiven, and other-directed needs, including the need to love, the need to delight in goodness, and the need to be present. In all, he lists thirteen existential needs, which he distinguishes from desires by the criterion of intensity. Thus, the needs will be simply desires for some, but they will be legitimate needs for others.

Next, Williams formally discusses the existential argument for belief in God: We have existential needs (cosmic security, meaning, love, etc.). Faith in God satisfies these needs. Therefore, our faith in God is justified (32). Here, Williams is honest about the force of his argument, stating that the argument would be more cogent if every person experienced every need, but this is simply not the case. Williams bolsters his case with biblical examples of appeal to existential need, as well as interacting with thinkers like Pascal, James, and Lewis in order to nuance and differentiate his own argument from theirs. The distinguishing factor in Williams’ argument is that he combines existential and evidential reasons for belief in God, thus developing a strong argument that the honest reader would be hard-pressed to reject.

In chapters 4-7, Williams answers four objections to his argument: 1) the existential argument does not guarantee truth, 2) the existential argument justifies belief in any kind of God, 3) not everyone feels existential needs, and 4) existential needs can be satisfied without faith. He answers each of these objections by supplementing the existential argument with an evidential argument.

For those of us who struggle with the role of emotion in faith and life, chapter 8 provides substantial reasons for giving emotion its proper place at the table. Williams interacts with common objections to the integration of emotion, showing

how emotion as a factor in faith and life has too long been underplayed. Williams interacts with Kierkegaard to paint a picture of faith that rehabilitates the role of emotion in coming to faith in God. Williams ends his treatise with a brief chapter that celebrates the role of emotion in life, concluding that it is emotion that makes life (ours as well as God's) so spectacular (182).

Williams' purpose in writing *Existential Reasons* was to defend the role of existential reasons for believing in God to both lay and professional readers. In this, he succeeded admirably. Though philosophical texts are often, by necessity, technical and difficult for the novice to follow, Williams has written a text that is simultaneously dense and comprehensible. His writing style is pleasing, and he has laced the book with stories of people, in their own words, who have come to believe in God through the satisfaction of existential needs. Furthermore, his sophisticated interaction with Freud, Lewis, Kierkegaard, and James is a breath of fresh air. In this reviewer's opinion, his work would have benefited from more engagement with the biblical text, but to Williams' credit, that was not his aim. This reviewer heartily recommends this work to Christian apologists and skeptics alike who struggle with the role of emotion in the journey of faith. Those who have entered into a relationship with Christ through the satisfaction of existential needs will likely find the book superfluous, for they have already embraced the path toward faith that Williams commends.

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The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited by Scot McKnight.
Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011, 177pp., \$19.99 USD.

In *The King Jesus Gospel*, Scot McKnight seeks to reexamine what constitutes the "gospel" of the New Testament. McKnight's describes his thesis as the result of many years of uneasiness with "typical" gospel presentations, which are often focused on bringing an individual to a "decision" for Jesus. McKnight's goal is to define the gospel within its first-century context "as if we were the first listeners to the apostles' gospel" (p. 24). McKnight, early in the text, indicates that the problems with the modern gospel are the absence of a connection with the story of Israel, and too sharp a focus on "salvation" or "justification by faith" as the all-encompassing definition of the good news. As McKnight summarizes, "For most American Christians, the gospel is about getting my sins forgiven so I can go to heaven when I die," a misguided view which is "deconstructing the church" (p. 27). He contends that when evangelicals talk about the *euangelion* ("gospel"), they in actuality mean *soteria* ("salvation"), as in personal salvation. The goal of the book is thus to show that the "gospel" of the New Testament is not equal to the "personal-Plan-of-Salvation" or "how-we-get-saved" (pp. 38-39). Along with this contention,

McKnight aims to show that “getting saved” does not equal “being a disciple,” or that the *soteria*-gospel limits or restricts the full message of the *euangelion*-gospel.

As he builds his case, McKnight begins by examining 1 Corinthians 15, which he defines as the closest place to a definition of “the gospel” that can be found in the NT. Here McKnight focuses on several key elements that he sees as missing from most gospel formulations today. Of most significance are the connection of the story of Israel to Jesus (“according to the Scriptures”), the gospel as the “full” story of Jesus (life, death, burial, resurrection, appearance, ascension, second coming, reigning) and not only a gospel of “cross,” Jesus as Messiah, Lord, Son/King, and Savior, and not Savior alone, and Jesus as the Sent One of God. McKnight further affirms the distinction made by N. T. Wright that the gospel is a proclamation which results in people “getting saved,” not a system which explains how to “get saved.” McKnight is clear that this lack of distinction results in turning a story about Israel, Jesus, and God “into a story about *me and my own personal salvation*” (p. 62).

McKnight draws out some interesting connections between the development of the historic Christian creeds and the core of the gospel found in 1 Cor. 15. He argues that the early church embraced a gospel culture rather than a salvation culture, with a dramatic shift occurring as a result of the Reformation, which resulted in a redefinition of the gospel in terms of personal salvation. In order to highlight their differences with the Catholic Church, the Reformers reshaped their confessions with a resulting focus on personal salvation and justification by faith instead of upon the Trinity and the expression of the gospel in 1 Cor. 15 as seen in the early creeds. He is careful not to lay blame upon the Reformers, instead drawing out the perhaps unintended results of their work. The outcome was an eventual emphasis upon individual conversion experiences, and often little else.

McKnight’s reminder of the nature of the Gospels (not as a unique genre, but as four testimonies of the single gospel of Jesus Christ) provides additional support for his argument that the gospel must be defined as the story of Jesus and not the plan of salvation. Central also to Jesus’ own preaching of the gospel was his proclamation that he was the one through whom God’s kingdom would break into human history. McKnight musters further evidence from the preaching summaries in the book of Acts, which also focus on Jesus as fulfillment of Israel’s story as the main content of the gospel message.

Having made his case, McKnight summarizes his proposal. He suggests that the church can resolve its ‘gospeling’ conundrum by 1) becoming immersed in the story of the people of God, 2) being deeply familiar with the story of Jesus in the context of the four Gospels, 3) recasting the gospel as culture changes while being aware of how Christians have done this in the past, 4) countering the stories that oppose the story of Israel fulfilled in the story of Jesus (e.g., individualism, nationalism, relativism, etc.), and, finally, 5) embracing the story so as be saved and transformed by it.

The King Jesus Gospel is a well-written, thought provoking, and engaging work. McKnight is an able New Testament scholar and writer, and he builds his

case effectively. The early chapters are filled with anecdotal comments from students, which help illustrate his thesis, and later chapters include interactions with pastors and scholars who either support McKnight's perspective or serve as illustrations of how the "soterian" paradigm is incomplete. The text also contains numerous connections to other scholarly works and includes trails for further study of ancillary issues that the text itself does not seek to address.

Several elements of the text could be clarified or improved. While McKnight mentions postmodernism as one of the worldviews needing critique by the story of Jesus, there is a perceived over-emphasis on story and an occasional absence of affirmation of history. Evangelicals must affirm that it is not the story of Jesus that saves, but rather what Jesus actually accomplished which we know, remember, and pass on through his story. Similarly, it is not the story that must be embraced or that can save and transform, but the Jesus whom the story reveals. McKnight clarifies this at points in the text (e.g., p. 131), but sometimes slips into "story" language over "Jesus" language (e.g., "*we need to embrace this story so that we are saved*" (p. 158), and "to embrace the gospel story summons us to a life of communication with God..." (p. 159)). We certainly know of Jesus through the story, but it is not the story, but Jesus' fulfillment of it and his life, death, burial, resurrection, and reign that brings salvation from the wrath of God. The text could thus benefit from some additional clarification given the occasional "fuzziness" of his language.

Though McKnight offers a convincing case that the basis of the apostles "gospelizing" was indeed the story of Jesus as fulfillment of the story of Israel, he perhaps overstates the centrality of the story of Israel in all of the gospel presentations in Acts. Here McKnight cites eight examples of early "gospelizing" and concludes that in each case the story of Israel was instrumental in the apostles' preaching. When discussing Acts 14:15-17 and 17:22-31, McKnight states that Paul includes the "sweep of history through the scriptural Story of Israel" in his presentation of the story of Jesus. While the Creator/creation motif is present in both texts, as well as a polemic against idolatry in Acts 17:22-31, little else is included beyond this, and it thus seems a bit of a stretch to argue that Paul was somehow communicating the whole "sweep of history" concerning Israel within those references. It may be more appropriate to say in these two instances, in which Paul is apparently speaking solely to Gentiles, that he is telling the story of Israel's God rather than the story of Israel. While Paul, no doubt, would have had more in mind, he clearly condensed his message and his Gentile hearers would have likely not understood much of the story of the people of God from his speeches as recorded in Acts. McKnight is, however, completely correct when he notes that the focus in all of the Acts sermons is on God, Jesus, and the resurrection-gospel and not solely upon the cross (though important) or sin (though also important), which are the foci of many gospel presentations today.

McKnight has provided an important call to return to the apostolic gospel. The individualism and easy-believism of (especially) Western Christianity has no doubt muddied our understanding of "evangelism" and "discipleship." The preaching

of the apostles never suggested that one can “punch their ticket” into eternity with a prayer and experience no transformation or commitment to Jesus and his kingdom. McKnight is right to recognize that the act of “faith” itself in the New Testament does not convey merely assent, but trust and commitment. There is a personal and ongoing dynamic between disciple and Master that must be nurtured after the initial commitment to follow Jesus is made. McKnight also helpfully reminds that there are multiple images of salvation in the New Testament, and they should not be subsumed under a single image. While McKnight’s central proposals are well-taken, there are some lingering questions about how the story of Jesus, history, and salvation interrelate, as well as questions concerning how much of “Israel’s story” should be a part of each “gospeling” activity depending upon the audience, as seen in the book of Acts. The focus upon who Jesus is and why he matters rather than the plight of sinners is a welcome one, as well as the reminder that Jesus is Sent One of God, Messiah, Lord, Son/King as well as Savior. *The King Jesus Gospel* is a worthwhile read and its message is one believers would do well to absorb.

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