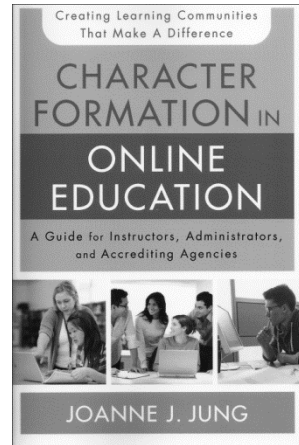


## Applied Theology

***Character Formation in Online Education: A Guide for Instructors, Administrators, and Accrediting Agencies.* Joanne J. Jung. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015, 142 pp., paper. ISBN 978-0-310-52030-6**

There is little doubt that professors and college administrators world-wide continue to grapple with the implications of on-line learning. How can those who have taught for years in traditional settings (and who have so much to offer spiritually and academically) be made comfortable with teaching through technology? How can students form meaningful bonds with their mentors and their peers when they never meet face to face? How can Christian spiritual formation be advanced in an online community of learners? Dr. Jung, associate professor of biblical and theological studies at Biola University in California has skillfully set out the answers to these and many other questions in her book *Character Formation in Online Education*.



The book is divided into three parts. Part one deals with the actual challenge of planning and preparing an online course. Even professors who are not involved in online learning will benefit from the three chapters in this section as Dr. Jung summarizes universal teaching goals before applying them specifically to the development of an online course. Chapter 3, entitled “Partnerships That Deliver: Tag-Teaming with a Course Designer”, is especially helpful and should prove to be a great encouragement to any professors who desire to move into online learning but feel woefully inadequate in terms of the technical knowledge required to get there. The author even provides a job description for course designers so professors and administrators know what to look for in terms of skills, experience, and character.

Part two takes the reader to the heart of the book: the challenge of creating online learning communities that are effective in character formation. The five chapters in this section of the book present a helpful combination of theory and practice as Jung moves from arguing the importance of develop-

ing “heart” in the learning community to practical methods and examples of how to achieve this important depth and development in the online learning experience. Chapter 5 on collaborative learning tools is extremely helpful in thinking through the process of getting students involved in meaningful discussions that apply course material. Chapter 6 discusses hybrid learning – a combination of traditional classroom time with online collaboration as well. This chapter helps the reader to move away from an either/or type of judgment and to think creatively about ways to combine the best of both worlds.

Part three deals with the very important topic of assessment. Once again, professors and administrators of any college will benefit from reading this section, only one chapter, as the importance of effective assessment is emphasized as an essential element of effective teaching. It is refreshing to note that Jung calls for course assessment as well as student assessment. In fact, she provides ten questions to consider that are designed to assess the overall effectiveness of the course and help those involved to increase relevance in future deliveries of the same material. It would have been good to include a discussion on “voice” and the development of teacher/student relationships in the online learning community as a valuable tool for assessing the authenticity of student submissions. Jung provides a helpful recommended reading list for college professors who want to be inspired to be better teachers. Even the titles are inspiring in and of themselves.

The two appendices make this book even more valuable. The first is a glossary of terms that will not only help the reader to navigate the present work but will also serve to educate in the general vocabulary of online learning. The second appendix provides a link and a list of resources available from Biola to further explore the concepts and issues of character formation in online learning.

It would have been helpful to include a discussion on the role of the church in this matter of education and character formation. How can the church “on the ground” be mobilised effectively to support the online learning experience and development of her members? It is somewhat disappointing to think that such an important link is not included as an essential and even obvious element of this topic.

Jung has shared her considerable wealth of experience and training in a practical and approachable format. This book is essential for all who are considering the topic of character formation in online learning. Highly recommended.

*Reviewed by Nancy J. Whytock*

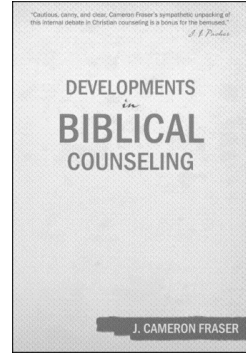
**Developments in Biblical Counseling. J. Cameron Fraser. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2015, 124 pp., paper. ISBN 978-1-60178-385-1**

At 124 pages this is a must read and resource to have in your personal or theological college library. Many of us feel there are enormous gaps in our understanding of the development of the biblical counseling/nouthetic movement. Fraser's work is like the primer that we must now read to gain a context for facing this subject. I would encourage all evangelical theological institutions to place this small book on the required reading list for all introductory-level courses in biblical counselling.

In four chapters Fraser as a "reporter" succinctly captures the essence of what we need to know to set us onto further discovery and understanding. The author gives a helpful introduction before launching into the chapters. Chapter one's theme is to lay out the "basic themes of nouthetic counselling as originally developed by [Jay] Adams" (p. 15). Chapter two is on "Some Criticisms of Nouthetic Counseling", and chapter three deals with developments within the nouthetic "school", even to the point where some have dropped the term "nouthetic" (p. 59). This is followed by Fraser's irenically written fourth chapter to present a "modest" presentation on "how some of these developments have a certain affinity with [some] Puritan approaches to counselling that Adams rejects, but which may in fact point in a more consistent biblical direction" (p. 15). Fraser introduces the reader in this chapter (amongst others) to Timothy Keller's article, "Puritan Resources for Biblical Counseling" (1988). This is really Fraser's gracious way of offering his adjustment to the nouthetic model or the "cure of souls". Here the reader will have to make their assessment and come to their own convictions.

Fraser has included a bibliography which again a careful read-through will help newcomers to navigate through this world of the last fifty years in biblical counselling.<sup>1</sup> I believe the author "reports" well (he has served twice as a magazine editor) and appears to be fair and even-handed. Throughout the book he demonstrates a pastor/shepherd's heart to the subject – he has been a pastor of thirty-plus years in western Canada. For many of us who have not explored this subject, biblical counselling, the way we should or could have, Fraser's work is now our go-to primer.

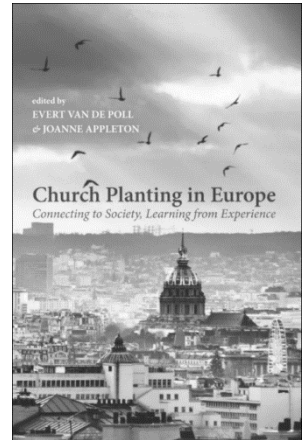
*Reviewed by Jack C. Whytock*



<sup>1</sup> Many will not take the time to master the large work by David Powlinson, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context*, (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2010), 331 pages and double columned!

***Church Planting in Europe: Connecting to Society, Learning from Experience.* Eds., Evert Van de Poll and Joanne Appleton. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015, 280 pp., paper. ISBN: 978-1-4982-0199-5**

*Church Planting in Europe* is a collection of essays born out of a significant and large symposium held in Leuven, Belgium in 2014 on the topic of church planting and mission development in Europe. The nineteen chapters are based on the lectures, workshops and discussions generated from the symposium. The editors point to the gap in missiology literature on European-focused church planting/replacement planting and the attendant cultural gap. This forms part of the rationale for the publication with two clear objectives for readers: 1. Readers will be equipped for church ministry and where needed, church restoration. 2. To relate this ministry to the spiritual needs and opportunities in multicultural and postmodern Europe.



The editors have helpfully divided the book into three parts, beginning with “Biblical Reflections”, “Church in Europe”, “Church Planters”, and concluding with “Case Studies”. A discernable theme of reflection runs through all four sections, with writers often considering best practices as well as the failures of various church planting strategies in Europe. The editors note that “[w]hen it comes to mission, evangelization, and church development, things do not work the same way here in Europe as they do elsewhere” (p. 2).

The socio-cultural and religious context to Europe is expanded upon in part two of the book, which, for many readers, will contain the most interesting and pertinent chapters. Of particular note is Evert Van de Poll’s chapter, “Typical Barriers and Bridges for the Gospel in Europe”. He finds a fundamental paradox that sets Europe apart from other mission fields and thus requires a specific missions strategy: Europe is the most Christianized continent, while at the same time Europe is marked by the abandonment of Christianity more than any other part of the world; in a word, secularization.

Van de Poll suggests five barriers to Christian faith for most Europeans and then suggests five bridges for mission outreach. Interestingly, Van de Poll’s barriers and bridges often align; for example, he includes Christianity’s long and influential history in Europe as both a barrier and bridge. Much of Europe’s Christian heritage is misunderstood today, but we, as Christians, have the Bible to help unlock the meaning of this rich cultural heritage.

Likewise, postmodernism is both a barrier and bridge. Van de Poll posits that at its heart, European postmodernism is a reaction to the totalitarian regimes and absolutist claims of 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The questions associated with a postmodern worldview provide openings for Christians to engage and bring to light the pretensions of secular scientific rationalism.

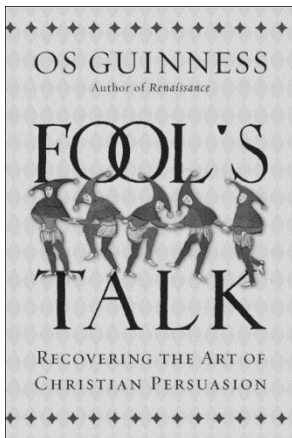
While the focus of the volume is on European missions, there are cross-over points for those involved in church planting in other geographies. Andrew Pownal's chapter, "The Church in a Multicultural Society", is particularly relevant for those involved in city church plants. Also, Jim Memory's chapter, "How Can We Measure the Effectiveness of Church Planting?", is based on research conducted on European church plants, but the methodology presented is extremely valuable and one that could be replicated and adapted in other regions and locales.

In summary, this volume provides practical advice and guidance for how our Christian brothers are approaching the gospel call in Europe with relevant lessons and practices for other church planters as well.

*Reviewed by Ian A. Whytock who lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia and attends Bedford Presbyterian Church. Ian works with a public policy consulting group and Asoko Insight.*



***Fools Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion.* Os Guinness. Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2015, 270 pp., paper. ISBN 978-0-8308-3699-4**



"We are all apologists now" – this is the opening line of Os Guinness' 2015 book, *Fools Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion*. Guinness turns his attention in this book to a sweeping tour of Christian apologetics and cultural analysis of the globalized world in which Christians now live. Guinness points out that we are living in a grand age of secular apologetics brought about by globalizing forces such as social media and Internet sharing and communication. These disruptive forces have been most influential in the way that we communicate, and as such, Christians must critically examine the methods

and strategies we are using to communicate the gospel message.

Guinness' book is squarely in the Christian apologetic tradition but with a focus on the communication or persuasion aspect of apologetics, a component which Guinness believes is sorely lacking in modern Christian apologetics. Guinness does not divorce the message from the medium but merely makes the point that such a powerful message demands powerful persuasion

techniques and these techniques must be adapted to each historical age. In Guinness' own words, "Proclamation and persuasion must never be separated" (pg. 27). To make his point, Guinness provides ample biblical evidence and points to Jesus as the exemplar communicator.

Readers looking for an absolute how-to guide on presenting the gospel will be sorely disappointed. Guinness notes that there is no one way to persuade and that Christian persuasion is more art than science; "It has more to do with theology than technology" (pg. 33). At first glance, the statement may appear contradictory given his focus on persuasive method, but Guinness goes on to explain that while there is a methodology to persuasion, done properly, this will be lost in the message it conveys and the Master it serves.

Guinness succinctly summarizes this key point: "Whatever little of apologetics is method must come from our experience of God and his love, his truth and his beauty, which are the heart of faith" (pg. 45). This distinction is a healthy antidote to many who have fallen into the trap of focusing solely on the methods and technical aspects of persuasion and less on the message being defended and presented. Put another way, apologetics and evangelism cannot be in isolation from one another. In Guinness' own words, "The work of apologetics is only finished when the door to the gospel has been opened and the good news of the gospel can be proclaimed" (pg. 111).

Guinness, in his typical fashion<sup>1</sup>, presents a challenging argument for our Christian call to evangelize and persuade people of the power of the gospel, while providing much needed critical commentary on the social and cultural contexts that the gospel is being presented within.

*Reviewed by Ian A. Whytock.*

***From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research.* Michael Kibbe. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016, 152 pp., paper. ISBN 978-0-8308-5131-7**

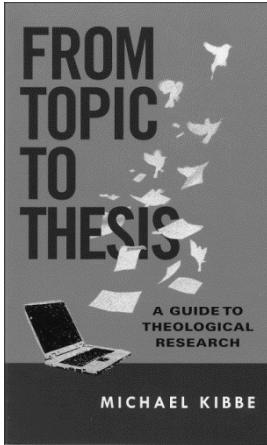
Librarians and professors alike owe a debt of gratitude to Michael Kibbe for his latest book. *From Topic to Thesis* is, according to the subtitle, a guide to theological research. Kibbe, assistant professor of Bible at Moody Bible Institute Spokane in Spokane, Washington has taken the time to summarise the research and writing process for students in a very practical and detailed fashion.

The author's introductory chapter explains to the reader the concept of "topic to the thesis", the student's place in the ongoing dialogue of theologi-

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<sup>1</sup> See also my review of Guinness' book, *Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Dark the Times*, in *Haddington House Journal* 17 (2015): 95-96.

cal research, the similarities and differences between theological research and research in other disciplines, and the key terms that will be used throughout the book to lay out the best method for conducting such research. Kibbe explains as he concludes his introduction, “You will get the most out of this book if you work your way through it as you are doing your project. Read a step then do it” (p. 44).



What steps does the author propose? He divides these into five broad categories and each receives one chapter in the book. Chapter one deals with finding direction. Here he offers four main points for the student to consider, and he teaches students how to approach primary and tertiary sources as they work toward narrowing down their topic.

The second chapter deals with gathering sources. For those who have read and used the classic work *How to Read a Book* by Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, this chapter reads very much like their discussion on inspectional reading. In my experience as a librarian, this stage of research is often very challenging, as students find it hard to “sift through”

sources and can be overwhelmed by the options. Kibbe offers some very helpful guidelines in the form of four keys to gathering sources. He further makes his point through an excursus on common mistakes when gathering sources. No doubt those of us who have spent time in research will identify mistakes we have made in the past that have been costly in terms of both time and outcomes.

Chapter three outlines five keys to understanding issues. Throughout the book, Kibbe emphasises that the student must be seeking to dialogue on a subject and that entering dialogue means first understanding what has and is being discussed on the topic at hand. As with chapter two, the author not only offers the positive keys but then provides a second excursus on the common mistakes in the research process at this point. For example, he is blunt, almost to the point of humorous, when he says one of the mistakes is too much quoting, “If you can’t say it in your own words, study it until you can” (p. 74).

Chapter four logically follows on with the theme of dialogue by outlining how students can now enter into the dialogue they should have uncovered by following the steps outlined in the previous chapter. The three keys to entering discussion are useful, but even more useful are the questions to ask of both secondary and primary sources. Kibbe’s parting comments to this chapter demonstrate his understanding of the student experience, “When the paper is specifically required to correspond to the course objectives... it never hurts to make clear to your professor that your paper does this!” (p. 85).

The final chapter, in keeping with the title of the book, deals with establishing a position, a thesis. Kibbe notes that this is critical to presenting your

research, “Your thesis is the heart and soul of your paper” (p. 87). His three keys to establishing position warn the student against writing without taking a position, writing too soon, and forgetting that you are entering an existing conversation – humility in writing is essential.

Each chapter includes actual examples that will be helpful to those who have never approached theological research before. At the back of the book there are six appendices: “Ten things you should never do in a Theological Research paper”; “Theological research and writing tools”; “Scholarly resources for Theological Research”; “Navigating the ATLA Religion Database”; “Zotero Bibliography Software”; and “A suggested Timeline for Theological Research papers”. A brief subject index at the back of the book is very useful for quickly honing in on a specific aspect of the research process.

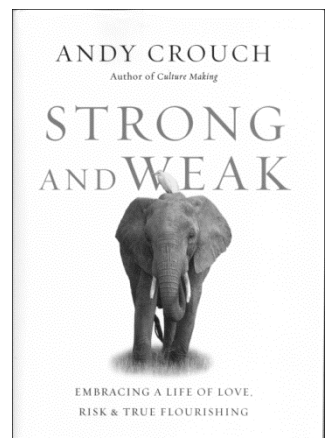
At 152 pages, this small book is packed full of practical help for those involved in theological research. Whether used by individuals or as the primary text for a theological research course, it will be a valuable resource to many and is written in a manner that makes it accessible within any cultural context.

*Reviewed by Nancy Whytock*

***Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk & True Flourishing.* Andy Crouch. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016, 192 pp., paper. ISBN 978-0-8308-4443-2**

On the heels of Crouch’s recent publication, *Playing God*<sup>1</sup>, comes another title in the same vein, *Strong and Weak*. As we have seen with Andy Crouch’s insightful work ever since his influential book *Culture Making*<sup>2</sup>, the author makes it his purpose to explore what human flourishing looks like for individuals and communities who call upon the name of Christ.

In *Strong and Weak*, Crouch turns his attention to the delicate balance that a Christian must strike between an exercise of authority and an authentic display of vulnerability. He comes to refer to this balance as “up and to the right” (p. 8), a reference to the diagram that he presents at



<sup>1</sup> Reviewed by Andrew Whytock, in the *Haddington House Journal* 17 (2015): 120-122.

<sup>2</sup> Reviewed by Christina Lehmann, in the *Haddington House Journal* 12 (2010): 82-84.



the start of the book. The first half of the book examines what flourishing does not look like by showing how abuses of authority or vulnerability can lead to suffering, withdrawing, and exploitation. In the second half of the book, the author turns directly towards his subject and demonstrates through personal stories, biblical references, and historic examples what it truly means to be both strong and weak.

Crouch argues that every one of us has been given authority from God. While some Christians struggle with the call to humility when using their authority, we all have a responsibility to serve with the gifts that we have been given. On the other hand, it is entirely possible for individuals, organizations, and communities to abuse their authority by refusing to pair it with the kind of vulnerability that invites others in and remains open to the necessity of help from others. In the Gospels we see that Christ Himself presented us with a picture of someone who was perfect in authority and vulnerability. He commanded the waves and made the blind see, but He also fell to His knees in prayer and submission to His Heavenly Father.

*Strong and Weak* is an excellent companion to *Playing God* because it continues the discussion of power as a means to glorify God. While this book may be more accessible to the average reader than *Playing God*, it is no less important to Christians who feel that God is indeed calling them to use their authority to bless others. Crouch sums the issue up himself in the opening chapter of the book, “There really is no other goal higher for us than to become people who are so full of authority and vulnerability that we perfectly reflect what human beings were meant to be and disclose the reality of the Creator in the midst of creation.” (p. 25-26).

*Reviewed by Andrew M. Whytock. Andrew lives in Charlottetown, PE and runs his own professional writing services company. He studied creative writing at Cornerstone University, Grand Rapids, Michigan.*

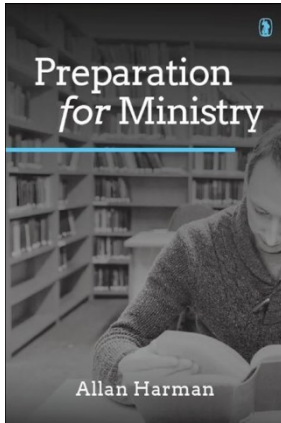


***Preparation for Ministry.* Allan Harman. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015, 117 pp., paper. ISBN 978-1-84871-623-0**

Many of us may well recall being given Edmund Clowney’s book *Called to the Ministry* (originally published in 1964) when we were wrestling with that very subject. It has served a couple of generations now and will remain helpful. Now here is a new work written by a committed churchman, pastor, and professor involved in training pastors for the ministry, Allan Harman of Melbourne, Australia, which will be useful for many today. *Preparation for Ministry* covers more topics than Clowney’s work and also adds some classic materials to round out the volume. This is a small book – Harman’s actual written material constitutes about half the book (fifty-seven pages) and to-

gether with the reprint appendices (about fifty pages) the work is less than 120 pages.

Harman addresses the issue first of coming to faith. He then proceeds to a discussion of “the call”. Not that long ago I had a conversation with some ministers who stated that there was no such thing as a call today. I am afraid I strongly disagreed with them and am glad to see that Harman affirms the call.



Next he addresses the matter of what is best for pre-theological studies and concentrates here more on personal development and not advice on educational studies. He has a short chapter on choosing a theological college or seminary and has produced here a very helpful chapter, one of the best sections in this little volume. This chapter concerning choosing where to study could be well used by pastors offering counsel to those in this thinking and investigative phase.

Harman then gives a chapter of advice on the actual “doing” of the theological studies. The book also includes chapters about the period after seminary training and offers advice on the early years in ministry and as well as on “staying fresh”. All of it appears to come from wisdom gleaned over a lifetime and is very sound and practical.

The appendices include a suggested preparatory reading list, a short guide to sermon preparation and two reprints, one from Spurgeon’s *Lectures to My Students* – the chapter on “The Minister’s Self-Watch” – and the other, Warfield’s “The Religious Life of Theological Students”. These are worthy additions and certainly enlarge this little volume into a good one-book resource. One comment here – the Spurgeon material would have benefited with some editorial updating. It may not be digested easily by readers who are not native English speakers – now a very large segment of those who read and study in English.

*Preparation for Ministry* is a great tool for pastors to use in ministry. Any pastor could find it helpful to have a few copies of this in his library to give away to those asking about a call into the ministry. It is inexpensive as a slim paperback and facilitates a whole range of discussions and conversations to provoke a deeper understanding of the calling to ministry, the preparation for the ministry, and the early years of the ministry. Warmly recommended.

*Reviewed by Jack C. Whytock*

***The Pietist Vision of Christian Higher Education: Forming Whole and Holy Persons.* Ed. Christopher Gehrz. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015, 239 pp., paper. ISBN 978-0-8308-4071-7**

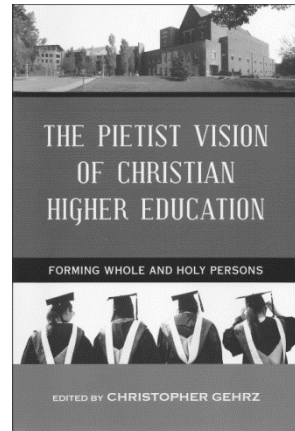
Perhaps it is small, but there does seem to be somewhat of a trend in recent years to go back and take another look at the Pietist movement both historically and in terms of continuing ethos. Modest, yet it does appear to be there. I think of recent reviews which have been published in the *Haddington House Journal* related to aspects of the Pietist tradition and this alone starts to alert one that this tradition is being given another look.<sup>1</sup>

I first came across the editor of this volume some time back when researching about theological education and pedagogical methods. He has a fascinating blog, *The Pietist Schoolman* (pietistschoolman.com), hence my interest was awakened even more when I saw this book edited by him.

Obviously, the title of the book indicates that this work is going to explore Pietist thought as it applies to Christian higher education. But what is not quite so obvious is that the book is really a case study chiefly of this vision through the portal of Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota, an institution with roots in Swedish Pietist Baptist history (maybe the publisher could have made this more explicit). I found it was actually only once I got into the book that I discovered this. The book comes out of papers developed in part from a June, 2013 workshop facilitated by Christopher Gehrz, “The Pietist Idea of the Christian College” where fourteen current and former Bethel faculty and staff participated. *The Pietist Vision of Christian Higher Education* then grew to seventeen contributors.

The introductory essay by the editor asks a worthy question: “Does Pietism Provide a ‘Usable Past’ for Christian Colleges and Universities?” As would be expected in such a collection, the answer is “yes”. Gehrz sets forth his working definition of a Pietist as both movement and ethos at the outset:

Pietists at all times and in all places seek a more authentic Christianity: not inherited or assumed, coerced or affected, but lived out through transformative experiences of conversion and regeneration. Suspicious of ‘dead orthodoxy,’ Pietists subordinate doctrine to



<sup>1</sup> See the reviews by Ken Stewart of *An Introduction to German Pietism* by Douglas Shantz, in *Haddington House Journal*, 18 (2016), 39-41 and also *The Pietist Impulse in Christianity*, eds. Christian T. Collins Winn, Christopher Gehrz, G. William Carlson, and Eric Holst, in *Haddington House Journal*, 15 (2013), 94-96.

Scripture – with an irenic, or peaceable, spirit prevailing in matters where the Bible leaves open a range of interpretations... Clergy and laity alike form a common priesthood actively engaged in worship, education, evangelism and social action, in the firm hope that God intends ‘better times’ for the church and the world. (p. 20-21)

With basically only a passing comment towards other Pietist strains such as some within the Reformed, the chapter, as so with the whole book, focuses chiefly upon Pietism in the Scandinavian ethnic grouping. Spener and Francke surface many times in the book but as interpreted through Swedish leaders to America and their offspring. Unfortunately often this is a neglected area when American church history is taught, so in that sense alone the book is educational and informative.

Following Gehrz’s opening essay are five essays forming part one, whereby the Pietist historical distinctives are revealed as the backdrop that helped to shape Christian higher education today. Pedagogically there is material here for those not acquainted or consciously Pietists, but perhaps seeing themselves as “evangelicals” only. Reading these chapters as any Christian higher educationalist should be helpful. Be prepared for some controversial opinions as Roger Olson is a wonderful writer but he can generate controversy.

Part two has three chapters dealing with a stereotype of Pietism as “world-denying”. The chapters debunk this as much as any stereotype can be, as there are always plenty of exceptions which have formed the backdrop for such popular stereotypes.

Part three only has two chapters. These chapters focus on the natural and health sciences as related to Pietist values and approaches.

The theme of part four is how to attempt to put such a Pietist vision for higher education into practice, hence the title here, “Problems and Proposals”. Here there is an excellent chapter by Kent Gerber offering many valuable historical lessons and contemporary applications on curating, yes, curating – very well done. But the chapter by Samuel Zalanga, “Neoliberal Challenges to the Pietist Vision of Christian Higher Education” was too broad-stroke. There are many more complexities which needed to be considered, and the problems needed to be more carefully nuanced. There is very little in the way of proposal in that chapter.

As Gehrz introduced the volume, so he also writes the conclusion. He takes us back to his opening theme, “the usable past”. He has an interesting discussion on innovation challenges in higher education such as technology and distance education and the usable past both positively and negatively. There are some excellent pedagogical quotations that an educator will want to keep at hand to use in training events from Gehrz’s conclusion.

I must confess that I was drawn to some of the authors more than others. This is unavoidable in such a collection. Overall I was stimulated to think

about the educational institution where I am also involved; so in this way, even though very much a case-study, this book can force any Christian educationalist (even if one is not in a liberal arts college) to be challenged as leaders. Also the book is certainly making a contribution to the renewal of interest in Pietism. Although this work is limited in many regards to one particular strain within that movement, it is worthy for all to consider.

There are some notes of criticism. First, unfortunately, the preface appears to stereotype all in the Reformed community, just as perhaps the book also tries to dispel certain stereotypes of Pietism. There was some irony in that. Second, I found a couple of chapters were too overloaded. Third, an interesting comment about the weakness of worldview studies also in light of Pietism was made. That comment needed more unpacking.

The discussion is not over on the Pietist viewpoint and higher education – it needs to continue. Overall, this work is a helpful contribution in keeping the discussion going, or should I say, for starting the discussion. Next please.

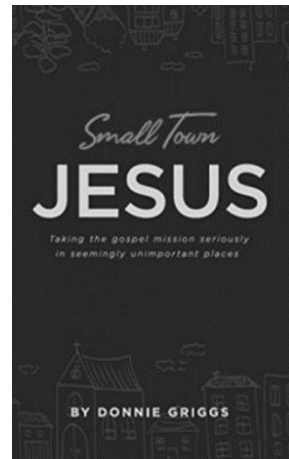
*Reviewed by Jack C. Whytock*

*Small Town Jesus: Taking the Gospel Mission Seriously in Seemingly Unimportant Places.* Donnie Griggs. No place: EverTruth Publishing, 2016, 168 pp., paper. ISBN 978-0-9914030-5-9

I looked forward to reading this book since I also live and serve in a small town (2800 people) where we are trying with God's help to bring the good news of Jesus to the people of our small town community.

Griggs devotes the first half of the book to showing how small towns still matter and still present a major mission field for bringing the gospel to broken and hurting people. He laments how small towns are too often forgotten in today's missional church landscape where cities seem to be where the action is in terms of planting and building churches. He makes the case that people in small towns need Jesus as much as those living in larger centres and that the church can make just as much of an impact for the gospel in small towns as in urban areas.

As Griggs rightly suggests, small towns are not immune from the brokenness and social issues that are found in larger centres today. People assume that small towns are more church-ed today than cities, but less and less of the younger generation are found in small town churches today also. Small towns need strong churches and effective leaders just as much as the city.



Griggs builds his case for the importance of small town ministry by pointing to the ministry of Jesus and how Jesus was not only born and raised within a small town but how Jesus did much of his ministry in the villages of Israel along with what He did in the city. While Griggs makes some good points about that, he does get somewhat redundant in this section and sometimes tries too hard to make the point about Jesus doing small town ministry.

In the second half of the book, the author offers some helpful tips on how to do effective ministry in a small town setting. He stresses the importance of getting to know how your small town ticks and how you can only do that by listening and watching how people live their lives. He suggests that understanding the ways that small town people think is crucial in knowing how to point them to Jesus.

In that regard, Griggs stresses that small town pastors shouldn't try to merely copy the methodology of big city pastors and/or churches. The challenge is to understand the needs of your unique community and to address those needs accordingly.

Griggs' use of a "Chapter Pop Quiz" at the end of each chapter in the second half of the book is helpful in raising some good questions about how to evaluate the effectiveness of one's ministry within a small town setting. He does a good job of fleshing out some of the mindsets a pastor will encounter within a small town setting and how a pastor's reputation really matters in a small town. People will soon sense whether a pastor cares enough to "do life with them" in their town. The biggest challenge, says Griggs, is getting people to see that God is big enough to do great things even in a small rural setting.

I did wonder somewhat whether Griggs' town of 9200 is really a small town or not, but the points he makes about small town ministry definitely show that he does understand the intricacies and challenges of serving in a small town setting. The book is very accessible and its shortness and clarity makes it a good read for anyone who is involved in small town ministry in some way.

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