

1-1-1992

How Can it be all Right When Everything is all Wrong? Lewis Smedes

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Recommended Citation

Ames, Randall (1992) "How Can it be all Right When Everything is all Wrong? Lewis Smedes," *Leaven*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol2/iss2/15>

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Book Reviews

Jack Reese, Editor



THE LIVING REMINDER

Henri J.M. Nouwen
Seabury Press, 1977

When considering the inward life of the Christian and the aspects of consolation that go along with it, Henri Nouwen's name comes to mind. His eloquent prose has kept the path toward knowing God illumined and exciting. An early work, **The Wounded Healer**, spoke in contemporary ways (at least for the 60's) of finding rootedness and meaning for life through joining with others in suffering. Other works, **Compassion, Reaching Out**, have inspired and challenged conceptions of spirituality and ministry. But my favorite Nouwen book is **The Living Reminder**. My copy of the book is filled with "dog-eared" pages and underlines and scribbled notes. I return to its pages often whether to find a meaningful quote, to live in its images as I ponder a sermon, or to remind myself of perhaps the most vital aspects of my life in ministry. I confess that it is one of my favorite books because it is short and the large print makes the 80 pages more of a stroll than a hard academic work-out. But there are several places to stop and breathe deeply the aromas created by Nouwen's writing.

The thesis of the book is simple. Ministry is rooted in remembrance and the minister serves as a living reminder of Jesus Christ. Vital to this undertaking is a life of service and prayer. His stated

concern is the "relationship between the professional and personal life of those who want to work in the service of the Gospel. (The questions of this book) call for a careful explanation of the connections between ministry and spirituality."

The book is divided into three sections: The Minister as a Healing Reminder; The Minister as a Sustaining Reminder; The Minister as a Guiding Reminder. Each chapter focuses first of the source of life for the task, then the task itself, and finally focuses on the person connected to the task. For example, the sub-headings of the first chapter are: *The Wounds; The Healing; The Healer*.

As a healing reminder, the minister allows others to remember the unspoken things that bind them by tying their forgetfulness to the memory of the one who suffered for all. As a sustaining reminder, the minister learns to remind others of Christ both in presence and absence, in usefulness and uselessness. As a guiding reminder, the minister confronts and inspires others, leading them to recapture a vision of wholeness in Christ. The key to becoming the living reminder in each of these three ways is spiritual formation.

Prayer is central to this formation and the service of ministry. In fact, prayer for Nouwen is not just something that prepares us for service. It is service. "Prayer cannot be considered external to the process of ministry. If we heal by reminding each other of God in Christ, then we must have the mind of Christ himself to do so. For that, prayer is

indispensible.”

While this book is aimed at professional ministers, anyone could benefit from reading it. All of us are called to be living reminders. Especially those who have been given or called to pastoral roles in the church need to consider Nouwen’s insights. Besides, it is only 80 pages.

**Mark Love
Gresham, OR**

HOW CAN IT BE ALL RIGHT WHEN EVERYTHING IS ALL WRONG?

Lewis Smedes
Harper & Row, 1982

Smedes asks the penetrating question of this book early in the first chapter. “How can we be ground down in pain and grief and death and still believe that it’s all right at the center of life?” This is a question that makes doubters of us all from time to time, and is certainly a question that comes with any ministry of consolation. Smedes answer to this central question of life is the gift of God’s grace. “The answer must be blowing somewhere in the winds of grace.”

For Smedes, “grace is power, I say, to see life very clearly, admit it is sometimes all wrong, and still know somehow, in the center of your life, ‘It’s all right.’ This is one reason we call it amazing grace.” The gifts of grace that empower our life are many and wear many names. Chapter by chapter Smedes explores the gifts of grace and gives insight into how they can point to a God that is greater than one’s suffering. Joy, forgiveness, freedom, wonder, suffering, being ordinary, an open heart, faith, patience, being held, and hope are all explored as manifestations of grace. None of them are a panacea for life’s ills. But taken together they form a dwelling place in God that allow us to make sense of life even when life makes no sense.

Each chapter is written in Smedes’ personal and familiar style. Reading the book is a little like having a long conversation with a friend who knows a little of what you are going through. The book is full of stories and anecdotes of people’s lives that touch common chords. The book is full of colloquial theology, sermonettes on life. Occasionally the book reveals interesting insight into scripture texts. For what it is, it is very good. My favorite chapters were the ones on suffering and being held where Smedes

combined scriptural insight, the grist of daily life, and theological exploration into something that spoke to the heart.

This is a book to give to someone having a hard time. It serves well as a starting point for discussion in adult classes or small groups. It provided me with a rough outline for a topical sermon series: “God’s gifts for everyday life.” As usual, Smedes has delivered something useful for the church.

**Randall Ames
Arlington, TX**

JUDE, 2 PETER

Richard J. Bauckham
Volume 50 Word Biblical Commentary. Waco, Texas:
Word Books, 1983

Although several of the volumes of the Word Biblical Commentary, including this one, have been out for 10 years, my impression is that the series is still relatively unused among churches of Christ. However, the general quality of this commentary series makes it worth examining carefully. If our neglect of the series needs to be changed, Bauckham’s commentary may be a good place to start.

Bauckham reverses his treatment of Jude and 2 Peter from the biblical order, because he believes 2 Peter 2 to be dependent on a reworking of Jude. He would therefore chronologically place Jude first.

Starting with Jude gives the reader an excellent introduction into Bauckham’s fine work. He essentially adopts traditional opinions on authorship and date, considering it quite plausible for the brother of Jesus to have written his “epistolary sermon” (which Bauckham accepts as a genuine letter) to Palestinian Jews, in the 50’s. And, in contrast to much of contemporary scholarship, Bauckham pointedly discounts and objects to the work of Kaasemann and others concerning “early Catholicism” as the ecclesiastical milieu for the writing of both Jude and 2 Peter. This will certainly popularize his work among conservatives.

The most significant contribution by Bauckham is his description of vv. 5-19 as midrash, seeing vv. 3-4 and 20-23 as the real point of Jude’s writing. In this he links the book closely to Palestinian Jewish Apocalyptic, and theorizes that a band of

itinerant charismatics (turned false teachers) have invaded the church to which Jude has written.

For Bauckham - who wants to take Jude out of the second century and "early Catholicism" - these false teachers are not to be closely linked with either a well-defined second century Gnosticism or an earlier "incipient Gnosticism." He chiefly bases this opinion on a lack of Gnostic cosmological dualism in Jude. But at this point Bauckham may be drawing too distinct a line between "incipient Gnosticism" and what he describes as "one of the streams that flowed into later Gnosticism, but which at this stage is not distinctly Gnostic."

His point is well taken that there is in Jude no signs of well-developed Gnosticism against which a necessarily late pseudepigraphic author is writing. But in his attempt to prove Jude's link to the first century, Bauckham makes too drastic a distinction between Jude's opponents and Gnostic or pre-Gnostic thought. The verities of religious thought in the first century prohibit in my mind, fine distinctions between "incipient Gnosticism" and "streams that flowed into later Gnosticism, but which at this stage (are) not distinctly Gnostic." Certainly, as Bauckham himself points out, many attributes of Gnosticism are present in Jude's opponents. Pre-Gnosticism or incipient Gnosticism is, therefore, for me, still the best way of describing the opponents of both Jude and 2 Peter.

This is not to detract from what is on the whole a fine commentary. Most of what Bauckham does with Jude makes a great deal of sense of the biblical evidence, making Bauckham's work the best I've read on Jude - and I just finished preaching through Jude!

Bauckham has also done excellent work in his treatment of 2 Peter, although he is not beyond criticism. This is largely because of Bauckham's linking of 2 Peter with Hellenistic Jewish writings like 1,2 Clement and the Shepherd of Hermas. Style, theme, and vocabulary, he says, make these later works the best parallels to 2 Peter, and he posits for 2 Peter a date and origin similar to theirs.

Bauckham admits that scholarship has tended to push the writing of these later works back into the end of the first century, and even grants that 2 Peter could have been written 20 years before the earliest of these; but he fails to state that this period of 20 years (say, A.D. 85 or 90 minus 20 years) puts the writing of 2 Peter back very close to what traditional opinions are about 2 Peter's authorship. He therefore, discounts Petrine authorship, holding that 2 Peter is a blatantly transparent pseudepigraphic work, written within the genre of Jewish "testament." To my mind this is not sufficiently warranted.

Bauckham's best work is his refutation of Kasemann's views of 2 Peter as the best representative of early Catholicism. This alone is worth the price of the commentary, and it is an excellent supplement to E.M.B. Green's **2 Peter Reconsidered**.

Bauckham's work in Jude is excellent, but his work on 2 Peter should be balanced by Green's commentary in the Tyndale series. Many of Green's conclusions are not acceptable to contemporary scholars, but until arguments are presented by Bauckham, or others, which show why Green's work is not the best explanation of both the internal and external evidence regarding 2 Peter's origins, the traditional line of Petrine authorship can be defended.

Kelly Carter
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CHARISMATIC CHAOS

John F. MacArthur, Jr.

Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1992.

This book does for general audiences what Frederick Dale Bruner's work, **A Theology of the Holy Spirit**, did for a more limited, scholarly readership. It is a clear, well-documented, bold assessment of the charismatic movement and the theological quagmire it has spawned. MacArthur manages to be straightforward without being unkind, biblical without being polemical, and logical without appearing to argue for an emotionless (and Spiritless) religion.

Charismatic Chaos, however, is less about the charismatic movement than about the foundations of a confident faith. Reformation Christianity, built firmly on the ideal of sola scriptura, has always viewed God's revelation through the Bible as the ultimate arbiter of theology and experience. Life is viewed through the lens of scripture and weighted according to its teachings.

The charismatics represent a significant challenge to that mind set. MacArthur charges that they make experience the ultimate arbiter of all things, including the Bible itself. Their theology is in constant flux, blowing before the ever-changing wind of personal perceptions. For them, revelation is ongoing, with God speaking through modern-day

prophets just as forcefully as through their ancient counterparts. The resulting theological chaos has led to the state that "charismatic celebrities barely even give lip service to biblical authority."

Chapters in this book deal with pertinent questions such as: Is experience a valid test of truth? Does God still give revelation? Does God promise health and wealth? Interspersed with these are helpful insights for developing an alternative view of the Spirit: How should we interpret the Bible? How do spiritual gifts operate? What is true spirituality?

The reading is easy and often shocking (as when Benny Hinn is quoted as saying to his critics, "I wish God will give me a Holy Ghost machine gun: I'll blow your head off!") MacArthur writes in a clear and conversational style that makes the material accessible to most people without sacrificing the careful and biblical basis of his thinking. **Charismatic Chaos** is a timely and helpful work that I heartily recommend.

Tim Woodroof
Beaverton, OR

HOPEFUL IMAGINATION: PROPHETIC VOICES IN EXILE

Walter Brueggemann
Fortress Press, 1986

How does one continue in the face of devastating loss? This is the question that God's people are left with in the face of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 BCE. With the reality of exile, Israel's faith must find a new existence with God and project a hope for the future that takes into account their profound loss. Walter Brueggemann traces some of themes from the prophetic voices of this time that allow Israel to live in exile with hopeful imagination.

For Brueggemann, 587 is a pivot, even a metaphor, for Israel's existence. This point in time must bring "the end of the known world and its *relinquishment*," and "the *reception* of a new world given through these poets," the prophets of God. **Hopeful Imagination** traces the prophetic voices found in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and 2 Isaiah. Each voice, using poetry as a subversive and liberating way of speaking, paints a different picture of the door that will lead to hope and new life with God.

The section on Jeremiah is wonderful. This chapter, "Only Grief Permits Newness," powerfully

traces the difficult task of speaking the truth of loss before a people lost in self-deluding slogans. It is Jeremiah's task to cause the people to embrace their loss, to convince them of the incurability of their wound. It is only through grief that newness can take root. "If the hurt is fully expressed and embraced, it liberates God to heal. Then all of the old power arrangements are jeopardized as the new healing transforms. Nothing but grief could permit newness."

While Jeremiah's ministry is a call to relinquishment and grief, Ezekiel's ministry ("Only Holiness Gives Hope") is concerned with holiness. His ministry embodies the holy love of God which is both tough and submissive. Judah is called to turn from idolatry, sexual misconduct, and economic irresponsibility toward neighbors. But it is not Judah's repentance that will be the source of future hope. Hope rests only in the holiness of God -- his otherness -- and the fact that he will act on behalf of his holy name. "All hope for the future rests in the very character of God, for this God will take seriously being God."]

The section concerning 2 Isaiah, "Only Memory Allows Possibility," is provocative, especially for what it says about the task of preaching. Many may be uncomfortable with the designation 2 Isaiah. But one does not have to hold to any critical view of the composition of Isaiah for this chapter to hold meaning. As Brueggemann writes, "Our exposition posits a theological situation of exile and newness, without respect to historical situation." The poet of 2 Isaiah attempts to create a "homecoming mentality" in the midst of exile. Memory of God's decisive acts in history is the bridge between these two worlds. "The poet appeals to the old memories and affirmations in an astonishing way to jar the perceptual field of Israel and to cause a whole new discernment of reality."

Brueggemann is not just concerned with exposition. He is concerned with how these works might inform ministry. He boldly asserts that America is in exile and that the subversive poetry of the prophets can bring hope to our situation today. Much has been said and written concerning our movement being in the throes of transition. It seems to me that exile may not be too distant a metaphor for our churches. We are caught between relinquishing and receiving. Our hope will also come through grief, holiness, and memory. Finally, this book is written in Brueggemann's unique, imaginative style. It provides a creative place to think about the message of the prophets and the task of ministry.

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