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## Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today (Book Review)

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# Book Review

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Bartholomew, Craig G. *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011. 372 pages. ISBN: 9780801036378. Reviewed by Mark Tazelaar, Professor of Philosophy, Dordt College.

Adding to an already-impressive body of work, Craig Bartholomew's new book, *Where Mortals Dwell*, is an important and timely contribution by a representative of the Reformational tradition to the growing conversation on the issue of *place*. Certainly those already interested in environmental and ecological questions, as well as those with knowledge of twentieth-century continental philosophy, will find much food for thought in its pages. Speaking personally, that's what first caught my attention. After reading the book, however, I can happily say that this is too restrictive a characterization of its proper audience. The range of topics, questions, and issues treated throughout the book—of which I will say more below—should make it of interest to a wide readership. But more importantly, the kind of non-reductionistic theological voice (familiar to Reformational ears) that Bartholomew injects into the conversation is one to which all Christians should attend. Why is that? Because, in the final analysis, place is a *spiritual* phenomenon, integral to our relationship with God in Christ. Though shocking or strange to some ears, perhaps, this claim is absolutely central to the thesis of the book. We—Christians included—have had a tendency to separate the spiritual from the physical, earthly, and spatial. Even those of us who deny this separation have not consistently worked toward an affirmation of place and place-making. This, I would suggest, is what Bartholomew challenges us to do.

"Place is a rich, thick concept which is notoriously difficult to define," states Bartholomew in his Introduction. It is, as he says, "a complex creational structure" (2). It may prove frustrating to some readers that Bartholomew never offers a concise definition of place. Given this lack, while acknowledging the difficulty, I would suggest that place evokes who *we are* in ways richer and deeper than does, for example, the concept of space, which, as Bartholomew says, is comparatively "thinner." Space, particularly to the modern mind,

is pure extension; that is, it is homogeneous, able to be parceled out into measurable distances. Space, Bartholomew observes, is fundamentally an abstraction. He does not mean to denigrate the idea of space but simply to point out that space presupposes place. In fact, when space displaces place, as it has in our modern/postmodern world, we become existentially uprooted. Moving from place to place is not the same as moving from spot to spot. The former should be genuinely more difficult and challenging for a human being than the latter. In an age of global travel and telecommunications (where I am always in contact no matter where I am), many of us might be hard pressed to communicate a difference. A *world* comprised of "spots" but no "places," or places rooted in nothing deeper than a spatial grid, is a broken world. Clearly, of course, we're not always aware how much place is a concern to us. We may even fail to be aware of our rootlessness. Perhaps we need first to become aware of it in a way similar to the way we need first to become aware of our sinful brokenness. In any case, place easily retreats into the background for us, and we quickly and easily become more focused on action and movement than on stage, setting, context, and horizon. It's not as though action and setting need to be opposed to one another, of course, but too often we fail to notice that places are not simply spaces, but can be structurally rooted, deepened, opened, enriched, textured, and so on, in ways that space can't be. One of the virtues of Bartholomew's book is that he celebrates the dynamics and dwelling that belong (or can belong) to places. One of the challenges of his book is for us to see how deeply issues of place penetrate into creation, fall, and redemption.

Bartholomew does not engage in close, technical analyses of these questions. Though he does direct the reader to more technical work (the bibliography is well over 30 pages), he himself does something which I think *should* properly

come first: provide a biblical understanding of place. In taking this route, Bartholomew promises to show us how contemporary conversations about place (regardless of the level of technical analysis involved) can easily suppress the spiritual character of place and, therefore, are inadequate. Though he does not do so here, on the basis of the biblical understanding he develops he could return (in another book) to these more technical analyses. In the interim, we can parse the place/space distinction by saying that the concept of place will prove more able to bear the spiritual depth and resonance Scripture discloses to us than the concept of space can.

In fact, Bartholomew tells us as much by the end of his first chapter, “The Theology of Place in Genesis 1-3.” He says, “Insofar as place evokes—as it clearly does—the nexus God, place, and humankind, it would be quite right to see place as a major contender for the central theme of biblical faith.... Redemption, examined through the prism of place, has the structure of implacement—displacement—(re)implacement” (31). This is *good news*, for today we live amidst a crisis of place, suffering not only from *anomie* but from *atopia*—placelessness. Bartholomew quotes Walter Brueggemann: “It is rootlessness and not meaninglessness that characterizes the current crisis. There are no meanings apart from roots” (4). The challenge we face is to recover a sense of place and place-making—and to see this recovery as central to our spiritual act of worship (Romans 12). In fact, this recovery is integral to the “renewal of our minds” (*metanoia*). A central thesis of this book, then, is that *place* is “particularly well-suited to excavate key elements of the biblical message” that in turn will help us to recover a robust sense of place and practice of place-making today (5). So what can we learn about place—crisis of place, recovery of place, and the task of place-making—from the Bible?

Bartholomew addresses this question in Part One of the book: “Place in the Bible.” I will highlight a few central points in the 150 pages he devotes to this discussion. A theology of place, someone might suggest, seems more appropriate to the Old Testament than to the New. The Promised Land is obviously central to the Old Testament narrative, and so anyone searching for a theology of place would find plenty of material there for reflection.

And indeed that is the case. For Israel, “the land is holy precisely because of Israel’s relationship to Yahweh and because it is owned by him and given to Israel as the place where they are to live in communion with him as his people” (101). But someone objecting to Bartholomew might ask if this concern for land (and place) is not “entirely lost in the New Testament?” The objection, in Bartholomew’s view, assumes an understanding of the universal scope of the gospel message that, in effect, *uproots* it from the creation—as though the shift from Old Testament to New could be a shift from Palestine to *nowhere*. For Bartholomew, the assumption behind this objection is due to a mistaken understanding of the apocalyptic and eschatological expectations of the first Christians.

And so Bartholomew rightly takes time to consider, with respect to the entire New Testament, what these expectations were. What he finds is that the early Christians did not expect an imminent destruction of the physical world. Instead, they expected a God who would intervene in history to abolish—not space, time, or the creation itself—all that threatens it. The implications of this are dramatic for our understanding of place. Bartholomew quotes D.J. Bosch: “Paul perceives the church in a way that fundamentally modifies standard apocalyptic thinking. The church already belongs to the redeemed world; it is that segment of the world that is obedient to God.... As such, it strains itself in all its activities to prepare the world for its coming destiny” (126). The obedience of which Bosch speaks here has eschatological import: “The one who is obedient is the eschatological counterpart of the one who out of disobedience surrendered his creatureliness. He is hence the beginning of the new world, the manifestation of that freedom of the children of God for which earth cries out from its self-imprisonment.... Obedience is the sign of regained creatureliness” (123).

The first part of the book, then, lays the groundwork for the idea that our contemporary crisis of place is not simply a modern or postmodern condition, and it is not susceptible and treatable within the confines of a purely philosophical or sociological analysis. It reaches all the way down into our being creatures.

In “Part Two” Bartholomew turns to “Place in the Western Philosophical and Theological

Traditions.” I greatly appreciate the generosity and sensitivity Bartholomew extends to those he examines and evaluates from these traditions. (In fact, this generosity extends throughout the book.) Though these traditions have contributed to the kinds of misunderstandings that Bartholomew tries to rectify in Part One, he does not use that as reason to dismiss or denigrate the figures he treats here. Though the biblical witness has been blunted, he says, and despite the fact that throughout our history we Christians have failed to build on the foundation the Old and New Testaments provide for a Christian view of place, we should not fail to recognize the “positive nodes in the tradition that we can transfuse into the present to forge a contemporary theology of place” (191). He does not find such positive nodes only within the Reformed tradition, it should be noted. I hope that all Reformational approaches will follow Bartholomew’s example.

I do wish both that this portion of the book were substantially larger (in a way adequate to the traditions he treats) and that the treatment had not been restricted to simply the philosophical and theological traditions. With respect to the first, even granting that much research remains to be done, and granting the limitations that publishers and readers are likely to impose on a book of this nature, this part of the book feels too much like a survey to be genuinely helpful. And all the more so since the first part of the book is so constructive an exercise in biblical theology. I suspect this may be due in part to the origins of the book in a college course the author has taught several times. But given the fact that the author acknowledges that a great deal of further research into the tradition ought to be done, allow me to suggest a brief, perhaps too cryptic, but I hope nonetheless constructive avenue for such research. I think that research into both the medieval idea of *acedia* (“sloth”), which developed in both the monastic and scholastic traditions, and Kierkegaard’s concepts of despair and anxiety could be groundbreaking for contemporary understandings of implacement and displacement. I say this for both historical and textual reasons: the twentieth-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger clearly serves as one of the philosophical inspirations behind this book, so I think it should be pointed out that his

work on place (and being-in-the-world) was in no small measure influenced by these medieval and Kierkegaardian notions (some might even say “cribbed”). For example, Heidegger’s analyses in *Being and Time* of what Bartholomew would call “displacement” are secularized versions of what Kierkegaard called the “despair of not willing to be oneself” before God, of being unable to live with oneself, a condition of which, as in medieval *acedia*, instability of place, constant uprootedness, and never dwelling anywhere—all the while throwing oneself *distractedly* into the world—are central features. In other words, some of the very same analyses that bring home to us our contemporary crisis of place are rooted in analyses that have long been a part of Christian philosophical traditions.

Now with respect to the second misgiving, even were the survey character to be overlooked, this portion of the book suffers from focusing only on philosophy and theology. Insofar as we concede that the “crisis of place” today is deeper than contemporary conversations might allow so that it needs to be reframed as a spiritual crisis, that fact obliges us to broaden the conversation beyond the parameters of philosophical and theological analysis to embrace every sphere of culture. The biblical theology Bartholomew develops from Scripture seems to me to have this as one of its necessary implications. Of course, he does broaden it somewhat in the third part of the book, but the breadth that appears there should appear already here. I can state this objection in a more positive form: aren’t there other traditions and cultural activities, such as the arts, to which one might turn to discover rich resources to help us not only better understand our crisis of place today but also help us to develop a better sense of place? It’s hard to tell the history of painting, for example, without reference to the ways that painting confronts us (or fails to confront us) with issues of place.

The third part of the book delivers on my recommendation of this book for a broad audience who would represent and be concerned with a wide range of issues of place. I would caution that you cannot simply skip to the third part if you hope to develop the truly robust sense of place the author wishes for you. At the same time, the issue of place cannot be resolved simply by having the right view or theory about place, so

this part follows necessarily as the conclusion of the book.

Drawing on the work of many people working in many different fields, the chapters comprising the third part are filled with examples and practical suggestions that I'm sure will encourage reflection and conversation. Whether the topic be cities, neighborhoods, homes, farms, gardens, colleges, or churches, the focus is on that central component of "culture-making" that Bartholomew calls *place-making*. Place-making is a task for people in all these locations. What follows is a small sample of the questions and suggestions in these pages.

A city is not an artwork, but why are we so good at paving parking lots but seem incapable of building cities of delight? Could a Christian community with ten acres of land at its disposal consider building the core elements of a potential neighborhood rather than simply a church building with a large parking lot? Might it instead focus on a church building of reasonable size, a public square, and a school? Could it take seriously the ecology of the land in the development of this plot? And commit to planting indigenous species of plants that would encourage vibrant bird and insect life?

Might neighborhoods commit to developing what are called "third places": contexts in which informal association and conversation are the main activities, in which all are welcome (but which has its group of "regulars"), a home away from home, within easy walking distance, characterized by a mood of playfulness, but the aesthetics of which are low-profile?

Might we work to develop homes that are not simply places inhabited by consumers but by

true home-makers? Homes filled not exclusively with store-bought, standardized furniture and accessories, but with items like ceramics, paintings, quilts, tables and clothing crafted by people you know? Can we imagine homes with porches on the front instead of garages? Homes in which bread is sometimes baked? Homes with gardens; neighborhoods with gardens?

Could we imagine a class of educators willing to live where they work and work where they live? Willing to take root and to cultivate a sense of place? Colleges aware of the history of the place where they are located? Committed to providing ample places for reflection and contemplation, and having spaces designed for conversation and the development of intellectual community? Campuses having a "third place" or two, and perhaps classrooms that aren't just "smart," but designed to evoke dialogue and exploration? Classrooms and buildings that carry a sense of their own history (unlike the kind of empty-space, nondescript, Cartesian classrooms that characterize too many colleges, in which one would have little sense of what might have taken place in the previous hour, or ever)?

Who, then, should read this book? I hope that by now the answer is somewhat clear, despite the brevity of this review and its necessary selectivity in choosing from among so rich a field of topics: Faculty and students, administrators and board members, city planners and city councils, church councils and congregants, husbands and wives and families, businesspersons and artists, historians and poets—everyone, that is, who seeks, with eschatological vision, to live a life in a place before God.