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## Liberating Message: A Christian Worldview for Africa (Book Review)

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# Book Reviews

*The Liberating Message: A Christian Worldview for Africa* by B.J. Van Der Walt. Potchefstroom: Institute for Reformational Studies, Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, South Africa, 1994. 625 pages; Paperback R50,00. Reviewed by Michael Goheen, Assistant Professor of Missions and World View Studies, Redeemer College, Ancaster, Ontario, Canada.

When the word mission is mentioned, there are still some people who think of a Western Christian being sent from a Christian culture to the heart of deepest, darkest, pagan Africa. Yet, while the West has slid into a neo-paganism, Africa has become the center of world Christianity. The African church has grown dramatically. In 1900 there about 8 million Christians (10% of the population). In 1990 this number had increased to 275 million (57% of the population) and according to some will increase to 396 million or 61% of the population. This dramatic growth has been accompanied by an equal rise in vitality and missionary vision. Van Der Walt rightly says that by the year 2000, Africa could not only claim to be a Christian continent but *the* Christian continent (37, 545).

However, with the dramatic growth has come growing pains. Alongside of the clear strengths of the African church, Van Der Walt highlights some of the weak points. He believes that the most important weakness facing the African church is the individualized, dualistic, and spiritualized type of Christianity which has been established in Africa under the work of Western missionaries. Van Der Walt rightly recognizes that the African church will play a dominant role in the world church in the next century. Thus he wishes to challenge them to overcome their dualist understanding of the gospel, and writes with a measure of urgency to a continent in crisis and at the crossroads. Van Der Walt offers a worldview approach to the problems, an approach he believes will move beyond an indigenization of Christianity, an Africanization of Christianity, the development of an African theology, and a contextualizing theology (28-34).

Because he is director of the Institute for Reformational Studies at the Potchefstroom University for Higher Education and professor of philosophy in that same university, we are not surprised that the worldview approach Van Der Walt offers is a *reformational* worldview in the tradition of Kuyper, Bavinck, Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven and others. In the first main section, after establishing the

crisis in Africa and the urgent need for a more wholistic worldview, he proceeds to define the nature, structure, and functions of a worldview and follow this definition with a helpful chapter on God's revelation as the foundation of a Christian worldview. He contrasts this wholistic and reformational worldview with dualist Christian worldviews and then spells out its implications for a Christian philosophy. A Christian anthropology follows, with the rest of the book being devoted to outlining a Christian view of culture and society. After a more general analysis of society, he works out the implications of a reformational worldview for friendship, marriage, family, school, and church. The last two chapters are given to an extended treatment of politics and Christian higher education.

As can be seen, Van Der Walt covers a great deal of ground in one book but it is consistent with his intent—to introduce a reformational worldview to Africa. This aim defines the contours of the book. It is written simply so that it will be accessible to first-year college students or seminarians. It can only introduce many issues without carrying out any kind of detailed argument to sustain his position. One might mildly criticize the unevenness of the book, as some parts are treated more thoroughly and others more cursorily, and the repetition and colloquial tone make parts of the book read like lecture notes. I believe, however, that for the most part Van Der Walt accomplished admirably what he set out to do. We have here an excellent introduction to a Christian worldview as it has been developed in the reformational tradition along with some explanation of the internal debates that have taken place.

Since I am committed to the same reformational tradition that is being spelled out in this book, I agree with most of the content, but question *how* Van Der Walt goes about his task. My concern can be stated as follows.

All worldview and philosophical formulations are bound by tradition. That is, all scholarship works in the context of a wider tradition by dealing with the issues and problematics of that tradition; by employ-

ing the language and concepts of that tradition; by building on the insights and formulations of that tradition; by seeking to reform, correct, and reformulate crucial or less crucial elements of that tradition. The reformational tradition has been developed in the context of the broader, Western tradition that has its roots in Greek and Roman culture and has developed today in North America and Europe. Specifically, the reformational tradition has been an admirable effort to counteract the synthesis of the gospel with Greek thought with a more wholistic formulation of the gospel. In the reformational tradition, its worldview formulations, theology, philosophy, anthropology, social, political, and educational philosophy have all been developed in the context of and in interaction with the Western tradition. Van Der Walt presents the fruit of this rich and biblically rooted tradition.

Van Der Walt believes he is presenting a worldview approach that moves beyond contextualizing approaches (33). Yet contextualization has a strong affinity with the idea of reformation, that is, the ongoing attempt of the Christian community to faithfully embody the gospel in a specific context. The reformational tradition is one such tradition that has sought to faithfully embody the gospel in the context of a Western culture that has been permeated by rationalism, individualism, secularism, and dualism. How does this worldview approach move beyond contextualizing approaches? Is Van Der Walt offering the reformational tradition as an a contextual, a traditional formulation of the gospel that needs to be adapted to the African context?

I agree with Van Der Walt that our tradition has riches that can serve Christians in Africa, especially since missionaries have transported the very dualistic worldview of the West that the reformational tradition has staunchly opposed. Yet I believe Van Der Walt's project must be more modest than he himself sometimes appears to say. We need to offer to the African church the riches of the reformational worldview that clearly bears the marks of its Western origins as one biblically faithful attempt to oppose the dualism and spiritualism of synthetic thought as it has developed in the West. However, the African church will need to wrestle with the gospel in light of

this tradition in its own context addressing the problems and needs of African culture.

The reformational worldview has not addressed itself to many problems that have arisen in Africa. While Africa has been affected by Western modernity and secularism, an earlier primal worldview that stands in opposition to Western secularism remains powerful. Therefore, Africa provides an entirely different context than Europe and North America. An example of the kind of problem that has never been addressed by a reformational worldview is the spiritual powers. Jan Boer gives a fine example in his article "Opening the Reformed World to the Powers" (*Perspectives*, February 1994). In relation to experiences with the powers in Africa he writes, "My Dutch Reformed World hardly equipped me to understand Benjamin's problem" (16). He calls us to move the goal posts of our Reformed worldview and enlarge our tent (18). This change calls for putting the gospel in an African context that can still benefit tremendously, I believe, from our reformational worldview as it has developed in the west.

This appears to be different from Van Der Walt's concern. Perhaps this difference can be seen in a statement made on the last page of Van Der Walt's book. "I therefore have limited myself to a *Christian* worldview for Africa—I am not able to propound an *African Christian* worldview" (603). One gets the impression from this sentence, indeed the whole paragraph, that Van Der Walt is operating with an older idea of indigenization that sees the need for adapting a Western formulation of the gospel that is normative—"Christian worldview"—to another context—"African Christian worldview". If I am reading Van Der Walt rightly at this point, I have grave concerns that this study will be experienced by Africans as one more imperialistic attempt to impose a Western formulation of the gospel or worldview as normative.

B. J. Van Der Walt is to be commended for this ambitious and timely undertaking. I sincerely hope this book finds wide circulation and readership in Africa. I do believe that our reformational worldview has much to offer the church throughout the world. But it needs to be contextualized in response to the various needs of the African culture.

*Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Toward an Economy of Care* by Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995). 165 pages, paperback, \$14.99. Reviewed by Tracy Miller, Associate Professor of Economics.

How is it that in a society as wealthy as ours we experience unprecedented scarcity, rising poverty, rising disease, and less and less time for community and

cultural activities? How can we be experiencing rising unemployment when so much necessary work isn't getting done. By describing six paradoxes that are