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Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview (Book Review)

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Goheen, Michael W. and Craig G. Bartholomew. *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008. 205 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8010-3140-3. Reviewed by Wayne A. Kobes, Professor of Theology at Dordt College.

Judging by the number of results one encounters when searching “Christian worldview” at Amazon.com—nearly six hundred—it is an understatement to say that the topic has become extremely popular over the past couple of decades. One might ask whether another book on Christian worldview makes a significant contribution in the face of the numbers already in print. Is *Living at the Crossroads* worth adding to the list?

The authors, Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew, clearly state that “Worldview is a concept that emerged in the European philosophical tradition, and it is valuable only insofar as it enables us to understand more faithfully the gospel that stands at the center of the biblical story, and to live more fully in that story” (xiii). *Living at the Crossroads* serves as a sequel to the authors’ earlier book, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, which effectively presents the biblical story that is to shape the life of the believing community. The last chapter of *The Drama of Scripture* leaves the reader with a few tantalizing glimpses of what it might mean to “faithfully live in God’s story today.” *Living at the Crossroads* continues this exploration.

Living at the Crossroads begins with an overview of the key issues that are developed in the book. Asserting that the biblical story is “public truth” that shapes the Christian’s understanding of reality, Goheen and Bartholomew challenge the reader to break free from the dominant Western notion that relegates the story to the private sphere of “religious” experience. They make clear that if the Christian’s life is not shaped by the biblical story, it will be shaped by another story—one that exclusively claims to put one in tune with “reality.” And this is true, not only for the individual Christian but even more fundamentally for the Christian community. This emphasis on a communal understanding of living in a biblically faithful way is consistently affirmed throughout the book: “The church is the community that responds in faith and repentance to the good news of the kingdom. Christians make their home in the story of the Bible and seek to form their lives by that narrative. But this is a community that also is charged with making this good news known to everyone else” (5).

A helpful discussion of the meaning and usefulness of the “worldview” concept follows in chapter 2. The authors not only present a helpful, concise history of the term and its usage, but assist their readers in deepening their understanding of the concept while demonstrating its helpfulness in pressing the comprehensive claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Their consideration of and responses to common criticisms of Christians’ appropriating the worldview concept are especially helpful.

As the book’s title, *Living at the Crossroads*, suggests, Christians individually and as the body of Christ experience

tensions and face challenges as they attempt to live out of the biblical story, which shapes the Christian worldview, in a culture shaped by competing worldviews. To embody the gospel in Western culture, believers must have a thorough understanding of the biblical story. With striking clarity chapters 3 and 4 lay out the biblical basics of a Christian worldview, focusing on creation, sin, and restoration. Those who have read *The Drama of Scripture* will find themselves in familiar territory in these chapters. The essentials of the biblical story, however, are presented in a concise and fresh fashion that highlights not only the coherence but also the significance of the biblical teachings.

Goheen and Bartholomew convincingly argue that if Christians are to embody the good news of Jesus Christ in Western culture, it is crucial not only that the biblical story “permeates their bones” but also that Christians have a profound understanding of the culture in which they live. Too often Bible-believing Christians naively have viewed themselves as standing apart from the world and, while critically attacking the godlessness outside the Christian community, have failed to critique themselves and the Church’s witness. The authors demonstrate that the powerful forces of the dominant worldview never leave Christ-followers untouched. The gospel is always contextualized, but Christians must always ask to what extent the radical claims of the gospel have been domesticated and thereby distorted by the prevailing worldview.

The authors’ chapters focusing on “the Western Story” present a concise yet extremely helpful overview of the origins and development of the Western worldview. In two chapters they expose the roots of modernity in the encounter of the classical period with the teachings of the gospel, the synthesis of these in the Middle Ages, and finally the triumph of humanism in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The impact of the victory of humanism on Christianity and the witness of the Church is exposed, especially as it is evident in the reduction of the claims of the gospel lived out and proclaimed.

The authors bring the story to the contemporary situation in their reflections on the rise of postmodernism and globalization. In light of today’s growing sense of global crisis, most readers of chapter 7—“What Time Is It?”—will find the analysis particularly perceptive and helpful.

Goheen and Bartholomew do an effective job of moving beyond abstract analysis of developments in Western culture, presenting the readers with specific consequences that follow from the dominant worldview. Unlike writers of many other overviews of modernity and postmodernity, the authors successfully put “flesh on the bones” of Western culture’s underpinnings so that readers recognize the effects of this vision of and for life in their

own attitudes and actions as well as in the culture around them.

All of the above would be of little use if the authors stopped at this point. A positive feature of *Living at the Crossroads* is its consistent focus on a faithful, relevant witness in our time. The authors provide examples of a variety of Christians who are attempting to be faithful witnesses in the difficult contexts of contemporary culture. Christ-followers who take their faith seriously will find it easy to relate to examples presented. A pressing question pervades each example: “[H]ow can a Christian remain faithful to the biblical story while living in a culture that has largely been shaped by a different story?” (132)

The tension of living as an alien within a culture shaped by a vision of and for life that is antithetical to the gospel powerfully confronts the reader. The authors consider a variety of responses to that tension—both faithful and unfaithful. In considering the contours of a faithful response, Goheen and Bartholomew emphasize the necessity of the Christian witness being communal and merciful as well as tolerant and suffering. Their assessment and counsel is especially convincing since they work to root their vision of a faithful witness in the specifics of the biblical text.

The final chapter leads the reader into critical areas of contemporary life. What are the challenges and

what is the shape of faithfulness in business, politics, sports and competition, creativity and art, scholarship and education? Rather than offering simple “how-to” solutions, Bartholomew and Goheen offer provocative examples and raise crucial issues. The authors leave the reader with a passionate vision for biblical faithfulness rather than simplistic formulas. The pastoral postscript provides a wonderful conclusion to the book. Here the authors remind their readers that God’s people are not called to “build the kingdom of God”—only Christ can do that. Rather, rooted in Christ, directed by Scripture, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, Christians are simply called to faithful witness—individually and communally. Believers may rest in the assurance that God is faithful to his promises in Christ.

In summary *Living at the Crossroads* is a powerful call to living out of a biblical worldview. Accessible to mature high school students, college students and Church members who read and reflect on the shape of discipleship, the book is concise and clear while leading the reader into a deepened understanding of the forces that have shaped and are at work in Western culture. Is *Living at the Crossroads* worth adding to the long list of books exploring Christian worldview? Absolutely! Christians who are serious about bearing faithful witness to Jesus Christ in our time will find the book enlightening, informative, and challenging.

Caldwell, Bo. *City of Tranquil Light*. Henry Holt & Co., September 28, 2010. Hardcover, 304 pages. ISBN: 978-0805092285. Reviewed by James Calvin Schaap, Professor of English, Dordt College, in his blog: <http://siouxlander.blogspot.com/2010/07/city-of-tranquil-light.html>

One of the loveliest moments in Bo Caldwell’s new novel, *City of Tranquil Light*, occurs when Will and Katharine Kiehn, early 20th-century Mennonite missionaries in China, observe the Moon Festival, a celebration of harvest and end of summer, with their Chinese friends. Katharine narrates the story, through her diaries.

“The people see the moon’s round shape as representing the family circle, and they gather with their relations to stare up at the full moon together,” she writes, then, sort of “western-ly,” apologizes. “This perhaps sounds silly, but it isn’t; it’s beautiful, and it is my favorite night of the year.”

She goes on to describe why:

Red paper lanterns hung from the towers of the city wall and from houses and shops on every street, as if the city were dressed up for the celebration. Chung Hao and Mo Yun and Will and I hung our own red lanterns in our courtyard then sat together outside and admired the moon, which truly was a marvel: white and perfectly round, and so big it seemed to

be right above us and shining only for Kuant p’ing Ch’eng, as if our city was the moon’s favorite place on earth.

Together, they recite poems about the moon and eat holiday “moon cakes,” she describes as looking and tasting just beautiful. “It was a magical night,” she says.

It’s a beautiful passage of a beautiful novel, not only because the event is narrated so simply but respectfully, but because what Katharine’s appreciation of the holiday says about the Kiehns is itself an indication of why this new novel succeeds as fully as it does. Missionaries, these days, even among Christians, don’t always receive good press. Culturally, anthropologists tend to see them in the same way that most native peoples have for centuries—the first somewhat subtle wave of Westernization. The worst of them come to the field believing in their divine calling to raise primitives up to the blessings of their own cultural way of life, a christianized version of “the white man’s burden.”