
Pro Rege

Volume 32 | Number 1

Article 6

September 2003

Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Krygsman, Hubert R. (2003) "Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 32: No. 1, 38 - 40.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol32/iss1/6

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Book Review

Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living, by Cornelius Plantinga Jr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002. xix + 150 pp. \$15.00. Reviewed by Hubert R. Krygsmann, Professor of History and General Education Committee chairperson, Dordt College.

Neil Plantinga wrote this book while serving as Dean of the Chapel at Calvin College, shortly before he became President of Calvin Theological Seminary. His book is the fruit of being commissioned to write the text for Calvin College's new First-Term Seminar for freshman students, and thereby to provide the lynchpin of Calvin College's revised core curriculum. However, this book's impact is being felt far beyond Calvin: *Christianity Today* gave it the 2003 book-of-the-year award in the Christian Living category.

Engaging God's World fulfills its mission especially in two important ways: first, it affirms the centrality of Christian faith to learning and also the vital role of learning in Christian faith life; and second, it delineates a Reformed worldview that Calvin College presumably hopes will serve as the framework for its educational mission.

Plantinga begins, as if answering the challenge of Mark Noll's *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, by noting an intimate relationship between learning and Christian faith life, especially in the Calvinist tradition. To love God with our minds as well as with our hearts and souls, Plantinga suggests, includes learning about His work in creation as well as in the Bible. Such learning, he argues, is a "spiritual calling" (xi) that gives us "more to be Christian with" by equipping us to contribute to God's work of bringing shalom to the world. Conversely, to enable us to glimpse that divine purpose, Plantinga calls for learning from within a Christian worldview (15)—one in which the Bible, as Calvin had suggested, serves as the lens through which the world is truly understood.

Using this lens, Plantinga offers in his central three chapters an "orientation" for understanding the world, an orientation defined in terms of the biblical motifs of creation, fall, and redemption. In his chapter on creation, he celebrates the wonder, diversity, and complexity of the world. Creation, he says, reflects the character of God: His desire for fellowship, His loving care, and His creative power and playfulness. Plantinga's emphasis on creation is one way that his Reformed "accent" is distinct from many other Christian voices that tend to sever spiritual life from temporal, natural life. To be sure, his view of creation is thoroughly theocentric and Christocentric: creation has its being in God, and God creates it out of His loving character and for His purpose and glory (20). And to know "Christ and Him alone" requires knowing Him in the context of His work in creating (as the Word in the beginning), redeeming,

and ruling creation (16). For Plantinga, like Augustine, true knowledge is rooted in faith and love of God, while love of God entails knowing and taking delight in His work in creation.

Plantinga goes some length in elaborating the significance of this creation doctrine. In the first place, it defines and situates humans: humans are made image-bearers having a special "likeness" to God, which they display in a care-taking kind of dominion and development of creation, in their communion with each other, and in sharing in Christ's self-giving redemption of creation. Creation also means that everything, while not to be mistaken for God, is made good and is potentially redeemable; that the world is to some degree intelligible; that material and bodily reality is integral to creaturely being; that human work and reproduction can and ought to be a blessing; that humans have positive responsibilities of earth-keeping and creativity, as well as basic "unalienable" rights; that each creature is unique yet intricately related to others in creation; that human life is situated in a world that has meaning and purpose. Plantinga develops especially this last point by challenging various materialist, humanist, and post-modern "anti-realist" philosophies with a Christian "realism." Since creation is God's world and He is sovereign, it has an irreducible objective reality and a dynamic regularity, even if we human creatures cannot grasp all its mysteries. Christians live in the hope of this purposeful order and in the God from whom it comes.

This emphasis on creation sets the stage for Plantinga's treatment of the significance of the fall and redemption. The root of the world's problems is evil, and in the wake of the fall, Plantinga puts it, all creation both "sings and groans" (48). That is, the fall diverts creation from God's purposes for it and directs it toward false and destructive gods that leave it suffering but not destroyed. Interestingly, Plantinga, who also wrote *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: a Breviary of Sin* (1995), distinguishes between evil and sin by defining sin as "culpable evil," or that part of evil for which humans are responsible. That is, evil is a "parasite" on the goodness of creation (52), or—in classic Augustinian fashion—the absence of being. Humans choose to participate in that evil by rebelling against God, and on account of their corporate nature they continue to participate through the generations in that original sin. Moreover, because of the central role of humans in creation, human sin permeates and distorts all of creation, leaving it groaning in its brokenness and its hope of redemption.

Yet evil cannot obliterate God's creation. By His persistent grace and through the power of the Holy Spirit that "often blows ahead of the progress of the gospel" (60), God upholds His creation and sets to redeeming it in Christ. By connecting God's redemptive covenant with the revelation of His law, Plantinga emphasizes that redemption is aimed at setting things right by restoring creation. Redemption does not take us out of the world; rather, Christ is for us and the world. Plantinga accordingly focuses on Christ's resurrection as the center of His work and of the early church's proclamation, for the resurrection signifies that God's love for and rule in creation—His kingdom—is not defeated by death. Christians "get in on" that new life, through the power of the Holy Spirit, by becoming part of the body of Christ and taking on its new identity. The fruit of this transformation is the gradual process of reforming our lives, a work that Plantinga describes as both the work of God's grace and our calling and responsibility. And since all of creation is God's world, and all of it is affected by evil, God's project of redemption involves reforming all of creaturely life to God's purpose (95-98).

Plantinga's review of these motifs culminates in a broad, biblical vision of vocation, a theme that permeates the whole book. Understood in terms of our relationship with God, and in the context of creation, fall, and redemption, he explains, the vocation or "calling" of Christians is to "strive first for the kingdom" (116) and so to make God's purposes their own. Moreover, since God's purpose is the redemption and restoration of creation, he writes, Christians "tilt forward toward God's restoration of all things, the final coming of the kingdom" (xii). Plantinga is careful here to avoid triumphalism and to admit realistically that, in our present "between-the-times," evil seems powerful and God's coming kingdom can be difficult to see. Yet Christians, he emphasizes, live in the faith that the earth is the Lord's, and therefore in hope that the kingdom is and is coming despite the trials of the present. Our "vocation," then, is not merely our work or career, but it is our calling to be members of the new body of Christ who are being transformed into the image of Christ, and who strive for the coming of God's kingdom (86). We do so most obviously as members of the local church community. Here Plantinga urges his young readers to be active church members, but he also goes well beyond church participation. We strive towards God's kingdom in our careers by caring for the sick and for creation, in seeking Christian education, and by participating in a wide variety of institutions that work for reform. Our redemption opens out on our calling to live and work as agents of shalom in His kingdom in all parts of our lives and throughout the whole world (34, 95, 103-105).

The entirety of *Engaging God's World*, but especially its core chapters, provides an excellent primer on the main

contours of the Reformed Christian faith. Plantinga's style presents important insights with graceful clarity, simplicity, and a touch of understated brevity. One of my favorite passages is his discussion of God's wondrous work in creation as it is portrayed in the latter parts of Job: In one spine-tingling verse, the book of Job says that God laid the foundation of the earth "while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy" (38:7) (24). Equally artful is his description of the Bible having a "wide-angle lens" (13) through which believers may see, not so much the details of the creation order that are discovered through study in such disciplines as zoology, but the big picture that relates the meaning of creation's particulars to God's purposes.

Plantinga also deftly attempts to relate the Reformed tradition, in something like concentric circles, to a broader American evangelicalism and to historic Augustinian Christianity. He identifies clearly with the Dutch-Reformed tradition, and especially with Abraham's Kuyper's famous declaration that Christ claims every square inch of life as His (xiii). And he easily weaves into his discussion significant passages from Reformed confessional touchstones and references to Dutch-Reformed theologians like Kuyper, Berkouwer, and Berkhof, and to contemporary scholars like Mouw, Wolterstorff, and Alvin Plantinga. Yet he begins his book by citing the Puritan founding of Harvard College (ix), and he makes references to such well-known figures in the broader American evangelical tradition as Jonathon Edwards and Charles Colson, thereby suggesting a consanguinity between the continental Calvinism of the Reformed tradition and significant strands in American evangelicalism. Beyond these, he cites biblical passages and a variety of Christian thinkers like Augustine, John Chrysostom, Luther, and Calvin. The overall effect of his approach is a wide-ranging summation that helps contemporary American students, not all of whom may be familiar with the Reformed tradition, to identify what Plantinga calls the "Reformed accent" (xv) of Christianity seamlessly with a broader evangelical audience and with historic and biblical Christianity.

Given his task of providing a brief and relatively simple "orientation," it is understandable that Plantinga passes rather quickly over such complex and debatable issues as what it means to be made in God's image (30, 37, 59) and his assumption of a realist epistemology (42-43). Despite this concession, and the book's impressive strengths, *Engaging God's World* nevertheless has some less-satisfying features. For example, his emphasis on the continuity of the Reformed tradition with a broader evangelicalism, while certainly true in part, veils significant differences that leaders like Kuyper and Benjamin Warfield, for all their common sympathies, could not reconcile. While Plantinga's approach offers a prudent and properly humble

Reformed “accent,” I wonder whether his softening of that accent helps students grasp the distinctiveness of a Reformed worldview.

Indeed, other parts of Plantinga’s treatment seem to limit the significance of the creation, fall, and redemption motifs that he recounts in his central chapters. For example, he briefly refers to “the spiritual disciplines” as prayer, study, meditation, and confession (126), though he provides no provenance for this concept. I suppose that he means that these are activities that help to reshape our hearts in conformity to God’s will for us, and in that sense they undoubtedly are important to the Christian life. However, identifying “spiritual” with only these activities seems to retreat from the much broader—and biblical—vision of our calling in which other activities like earth-keeping and peace-building are also “spiritual” activities in need of the direction and discipline of the Holy Spirit.

Also, Plantinga concludes with a section explaining that preparation for our vocation requires education in knowledge, skill, and virtue, which constitute the tripod-like framework of Calvin College’s new core curriculum. Much can be said about this tripod, but I will confine my comments to two points. First, knowledge here seems limited to a mental activity of analyzing and classifying, rather than the full-bodied, intimate, and active kind of knowing depicted throughout Scripture. Second, “virtue” is defined here as “settled dispositions to feel and act in certain ways” (130). Plantinga correctly notes the origin of this concept of “settled dispositions” in the Greek emphasis on “character.” Here, virtue as character or disposition seems to be a personal possession of some eternal quality, rather than the biblical call to love God and our neighbor, to do justice, to make disciples of all nations, that is, the call to respond faithfully to God’s Word for us, and to do so in a variety of

active ways, individually and corporately, and with discernment of the needs of our contexts. In this conclusion, Plantinga’s earlier emphases on Christ’s lordship over all of creation and on our calling to be transformed in our whole being seem to lose some of their steam.

Lastly, Plantinga’s presentation may be too generalized to capture first-year students’ attention. For example, Plantinga opens, in his first chapter, with a discussion of human longing that, as Augustine taught, is ultimately satisfied only in God, for whom we are made. Perhaps he is trying to cut to the heart of the concerns that all people, including freshman college students, may have. And Plantinga’s answer surely is biblical, while his emphasis on longing, and on the hope in God that fulfills this longing, is important for young people whose post-modern cultural milieu tends to cynicism. However, despite his appreciation of the particularity of creation, Plantinga makes little reference to the particular concerns—the bundle of hopes and anxieties, the relationships left behind, the baggage and treasures of youthful experience, the wide range of gifts and injuries—that color the identity and manifest the longings of eighteen-year-old first year students. Consequently, his discussion seems to address only the faceless souls of his student readers. This abstraction leaves me wondering whether his intended audience sees compelling reasons to “engage” the answers that Plantinga summarizes so well.

Plantinga’s book, especially its central chapters, offers a concise, graceful summary of the contours of a Reformed worldview, and in doing so it provides a valuable service to Christians everywhere. More, however, could be done to picture the meaning of that vision for young adults who we hope will take hold of it and let it shape their whole lives.