

Book Review

Evangelicals Engaging in Practical Theology: Theology that Impacts the Church and World

Edited by Helen Morris and Helen Cameron

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Evangelicals Engaging emerged from a conference in April 2019 celebrating the 70th anniversary of the founding of Moorlands College. The book offers pieces of practical theology written by people from across the evangelical and Pentecostal traditions in the UK, ranging from established scholars, to students embarking upon their first foray in the field. Structured around five central themes – engaging with the discipline, education, practice, students, and the global and ecclesiological impact of practical theology – the book covers a wide range of issues encountered by evangelicals when they engage in practical theology at all levels, whether in practice, education or research. There is a recognisable desire within the book to bring closer together biblical theology with practical activity (once seen as two separate parallels), thus integrating the two and, as a consequence, enabling evangelical practitioners to have a deeper impact on both the world and the church.

Morris and Cameron acknowledge that they have edited the book with two main audiences in mind, first, those already involved in the discipline of practical theology through study, teaching or research who are interested in the ways evangelicals are engaging with the discipline. Secondly, they hope the book will attract an audience of those within the evangelical tradition who, for a variety of reasons, may not have previously engaged with practical theology. The way the book is structured around the five themes seems to attempt to engage with different aspects of the anticipated audience. There is something for all readers here, ranging from complex methodological discussion (McKitterick) to practical theological reflection on the beauty of everyday mission and ministry (Spencer). Whilst there are benefits to this approach, including 'pick-and-mix' content which includes something for everyone, the broad scope and even broader audience means the book feels unwieldy at times, frequently moving between substantially



different areas of the field as well as between vastly different expected levels of understanding from the reader.

Evangelicalism within the book is defined by several different contributors, with Bebbington's Quadrilateral a popular foundation for many. Care has been taken by Morris, Cameron, Cartledge and others to acknowledge the unique aspects of British Evangelicalism, which some contributors have used as an umbrella term to include Pentecostalism. It is clear that global evangelicalism contains complexity beyond the purposes of the book, but Morris and Cameron acknowledge the importance of further conversations with global evangelicalism, whilst maintaining a boundary on what could otherwise become an even more unwieldy project. It was encouraging to note the high proportion of contributions from women, although Morris and Cameron note in their conclusion a lack of voices from black majority church traditions within the UK which is a significant omission given the continued growth and contribution of those churches within UK evangelicalism.

Part One, 'Engaging with the Discipline', contains examples of creativity with methodology. Andrew Thomas draws upon Psalm 119, exploring the significance of the theological theme of 'illumination' whilst Chloe Lynch explores the significance of ecclesial and pastoral imagination in the work of practical theology. Alastair J. McKitterick's contribution explores the role of teleology in practical theology, seeking to bridge what he perceives to be the interdisciplinary gap between theology, psychology and the social sciences. Finally, Helen Morris explores the significance of immersion in Scripture for gospel storytelling and faithful theological reflection. Engaging with themes of worship, human flourishing and secular culture, Morris considers how the gospel can be communicated to draw people to the wider story of the Bible. Each of the approaches explored within Part One is creative and brings interesting theological insights. Evangelicals, as explored extremely helpfully by Mark Cartledge in the final chapter and picked up also by Andrew Rogers, can become anxious about the place and primacy of Scripture within a particular methodology. Yet in connecting theology with faithful practice, one single, defended approach does not serve every purpose, and the diversity and creativity on offer in part one demonstrates exciting progress in this regard.

Part Two, 'Engaging with Education', contains an insightful contribution from Cameron using the story of the road to Emmaus to explore the current picture of both practical theology and theological education today. Cameron emphasises the importance of returning to tradition, a theme picked up by a number of contributors, for evangelical students as well as proposing a radically different approach to university-level formal assessment. Whilst her chapter marks only the start of an ongoing conversation, she raises a number of questions which will be pertinent for any involved in theological education to consider. Cameron also picks up on the theme of silence, which connects with Rogers' exploration of lacuna, and both identify the places in which the tradition, the church and the discipline have been silent in different ways relating to the relationship between

evangelicalism and practical theology. Throughout the book, there is a clear aim of identifying gaps, misunderstandings, and possible errors in order to create space for future conversation, work, and progress within the field.

Parts Three and Four move towards a grounded engagement with theological reflection across a broad range of themes from the Christian contribution to relationships and sex education within UK schools (Olwyn Mark), to a theological exploration of the experiences of ministry and mission through a community choir (Matt Spencer). Student pieces also range across a wide spectrum including an interesting exploration of Theodrama as a tool for connecting theology and practice in the classroom (Samuel Norman) to a reflection on hospice chaplaincy (Fiona Moore) and an exploration of a pneumatological approach to corporate theological reflection through a study of Elim Pentecostalism (Sheryl Arthur). It was encouraging to read creative contributions from a range of academic levels, however, these chapters lacked the unifying themes identifiable in Parts One and Two and were extremely wide-ranging in their approach to methodology. In many respects, there is beauty in this diversity although it also further contributed to the sense that the volume as a whole was over-ambitious in its scope.

Cameron and Morris conclude the book with a call for greater cross-disciplinary work between biblical studies, systematic theology and practical theology. In addition, they call for more precise work in articulating the role of the Holy Spirit within practical theology and attention to global voices to complexify the picture further. The necessity of these calls is clearly identifiable in the work collated in this volume. The book is an important celebration of the journey so far in the relationship between evangelicalism and practical theology – outlined so clearly and helpfully by Mark Cartledge in the final chapter – but it also identifies very clearly the substantial work which is still to be done.

Evangelicals Engaging is aimed at an ambitiously broad audience and attempts a task which may have been too broad. However, I admire the desire to hold together practitioners, educators and researchers in one volume – reflecting the goal of greater integration within the discipline as a whole. With theological depth and rigour, this book is a hopeful marker on a much larger journey, and I hope it will encourage further engagement, questions, and conversation, particularly for those evangelicals who have been reluctant to engage in practical theology as a discipline so far.