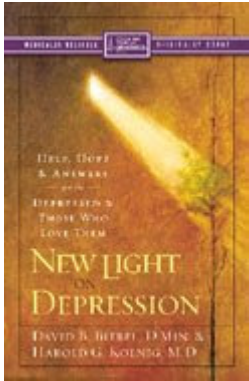


Review: New Light on Depression



I was trying to think of a short phrase that would describe David Biebel and Harold Koenig's book *New Light on Depression*. It's an overview, an introduction, but also a bit of a broad "howto." Perhaps "Depression 101" would be an adequate description.

I read the book as one who has known depression (albeit not severe) and has in the past been stalked by what Winston Churchill referred to as his "black dog." I have been close to others in my family and friends who have battled more greatly than I have ever had to do. And so my measure for this book, which claims the Christian Medical Association's motto of "medically reliable, biblically sound" was to ask two questions – Does this book engage with my own experience of depression? and Does it do it helpfully?

The answer to both questions is "yes." The book is split into three sections – the first part, broadly speaking, unpacks what depression looks like and the second part unpacks in broad terms various ways in which depression can be treated. These first two parts interact with my two questions well.

In terms of the first question – engagement with the reality of depression – the book is more than factual – it has deliberately arranged anecdotes, stories and examples. In my experience a depressed person (or their loved one) often has an "epiphany" moment when they come to the realisation that they are depressed and *know* it in themselves, rather than just being told by outsiders. (In fact without such an epiphany finding a path in and through depression is extremely

difficult). I can imagine this book providing such an epiphany – the “How do they know what I’m thinking? They are talking about me” moment.

In terms of the second question – helpfulness – this book is simply a useful but helpful introduction. The subtitle suggests that the book contains “Help, Hope & Answers” – I would agree with the first two, but not necessarily the last. There are *some* answers for sure – the broad brushstrokes of various types of counselling and the various forms of antidepressant are useful bits of information. But I think the helpfulness lies in the fact that this book would help someone to start asking the right questions, and so to seek help more deliberately.

The *third* part of the book made this book distinctly *Christian* and was the part that I, standing on the other side of depression in the present, appreciated the most. It is the most “theological” of the book’s parts. Of particular meaning for me was the chapter entitled “Faith: Acknowledging God’s Gift” where there is an excellent unpacking of how God’s grace can be found even in the valley of the shadow of death.

“We do not mean to say that the psychic pain of depression feels good (that would be masochism) or that this pain is even good in itself. What we want to affirm is that in the lives of God’s children, his grace can transform even the most abject pain into good because he is greater than and his love for us stronger than anything the Evil One sends our way. Satan’s objective is our demise – spiritually, emotionally, relationally, and physically. God’s primary objective is our growth toward Christlikeness.” (pp257-258)

They quote a colleague, Stephen Mory – “Depression is an opportunity for grace unlike any other. I wish no one ever had to experience its peculiar power to devastate body, soul, and spirit. The person who has experienced the blackest depths of depression knows the cold power of death and fear

that descends on the one who is still living but seems as though dead. He cries out like Paul, 'What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?' (Rom 7:24) The answer is in the next verse, 'Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord.' In other words, 'I have already been rescued.' Depressed people know Christ as their deliverer, and rejoice in his coming more than most Christians because they know that no one else could have rescued them from that overwhelming darkness." (pp264-265)

And finally, "...to equate something evil with the good that God can bring from it is to confuse cause and effect. Something very difficult may be the occasion for growth, and this is good, but the pivotal truth is that the grace of God is so powerful that he can transform even our suffering into something that advances his kingdom purposes in our pain-filled world." (p265)

This book is an overview and an introduction. It will shed light, clear away some fog, and maybe lead to an epiphany that starts a healing road. If you are a friend or have a loved one who you think is depressed I wouldn't recommend sticking it in the face of the one for whom you are concerned unless they are genuinely beginning to recognise a problem and are beginning to seek for handles to hold on to. Rather, read the book yourself, it has wisdom and advice – and pray and proceed with wisdom. Pave the way and use this book with love and gentleness.

[Update: An edited version of this review was published in the June 2008 edition of the *Tasmanian Anglican*]



Review: Reveal: Where are you?



Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson's *Reveal: Where are you?* is a useful book – in the sense of having a person come in and tidy your house is “useful” – you know what needs to be done, you could do it yourself if you had the time and energy, but you are immensely grateful that someone has done it.

In the same way I am grateful that these authors from Willow Creek have put this book together and have come up with a result that is *useful* – obvious, relevant, useful.

The book revolves around analysis of surveys done in and around the Willow Creek congregations in America and shows how some of Willow's assumptions about church growth were challenged by the results. The conclusions that are drawn are what make this book useful.

For instance, we see their conclusion that church activities do not necessarily produce spiritual growth, rather “spiritual growth is all about increasing relational closeness to Christ” (p38). This is obvious, but useful because it reminds us of the prevalent tendency of churches to fit people to activities and to fill “holes in the program” rather than concentrate on things that would foster spiritual growth.

There is a useful identification of a “spiritual continuum” that seeks to place people on stages in a journey of spiritual growth – from “Exploring Christianity” and “Growing in Christ” in the early stages, through to “Close to Christ,” and “Christ-Centered” at the end. If the aim is to help people progress along this continuum, then how does the church do it? By promoting (“coaching” is a term used at one point) the “drivers” of personal spiritual practices, and helping individuals overcome the “barriers” of things such as

addictions, inappropriate relationships, emotional issues, gossip/judgementalism, and “not prioritizing my spiritual growth.” The authors reflect:

“The church is most important in the early stages of spiritual growth. Its role then shifts from being the primary influence to a secondary influence.” (p41)

“So if the church isn’t the driving force behind the later stages of spiritual growth, what is? That’s where the second external element of spiritual growth comes into play: personal spiritual practices... prayer, journaling, solitude, studying Scripture – things that individuals do on their own to grow in their relationship with Christ.” (p43)

“We want to move people from dependence on the church to a growing interdependent partnership with the church... Our people need to learn to feed themselves through personal spiritual practices that allow them to deepen their relationship with Christ... We want to transition the role of the church from spiritual parent to spiritual coach.” (p65)

The most insightful consideration is the recognition of key groups along the spectrum that, while having journeyed in spiritual growth somewhat, have “stalled” or are “dissatisfied.” The “stalled” person is at an early stage of the spectrum and is usually caught up with difficulties overcoming the personal barriers to spiritual growth. The “dissatisfied” person tends to be well developed in personal spirituality but is dissatisfied with the (in)ability to participate, serve, or be mentored in some way. The key part of this analysis, and something that I want to take on board in my own context is this:

“At the heart of the unhappiness may be the fact that neither segment seems to realize that much of the responsibility for their spiritual growth belongs to them. This is the big “aha.”” (p54)

And so the conclusions of this book are, once again, useful – church needs to help people to spiritually grow by helping them to take on the responsibility for that growth. A good conclusion – obvious, useful.

This book was worth the read. I don't know if it's worth the money – \$20 for 75 pages (the rest is appendices) seems a bit on the steep side for what is a self-confessedly incomplete book that's more in the category of a report that would be useful to share by pdf than a book worthy of investment for later reference on your library bookshelf.

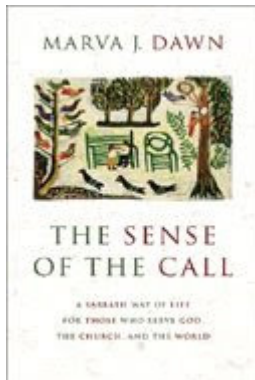
At times it was a bit *too* obvious – For instance – “In the end nothing was more *predictive* of a person's spiritual growth – love of God and love for others – than his or her personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” In other words, spiritual growth and relationship with Jesus correlate – my response was an out-loud “well, duh.” Obvious, but useful.

And at other times it's usefulness is outweighed by other resources – For instance the tool given in Appendix 4 and outlined on page 72 pales into comparison next to a tool such as Peter Bolt's *Mission-Minded*, which is basically the same thing (and a lot cheaper).

This book will factor into my own thoughts and machinations about the purpose, place and practice of church. It usefully points out the obvious. If you see it, pick it up and read. It won't take long.



Review: The Sense of the Call



One of the reviews on the back cover of Marva Dawn's *The Sense of the Call* declares "What a holy oddity Marva Dawn is." I would have to agree. I found this book intriguing, beguiling, annoying, insightful and stimulating – sometimes all at the same time.

The subtitle of the book is "A sabbath way of life for those who serve God, the church, and the world." And so, on the front cover, you have these two key words – "call" and "sabbath" – which become the substance of the inside of the book.

The underlying link that Dawn wants to draw between "call" and "sabbath" is not always clear, but it rests in an understanding of the Kingdom of God. Sabbath pertains to the ultimate rest of our souls in Christ and so is integral to living life within the Kingdom of God to which and in which we are called to activity and purpose in life. Dawn unpacks her intention for the book:

"For us to experience the fullness of God's well-being in the midst of the rigors of our work, we who seek to serve the Church and the world constantly need a profound sense of our call. In a nutshell, the sense of our call is that God's Kingdom reclaims us, revitalizes us, and renews us and thus reigns through us before others, on behalf of others, sometimes in spite of others, and always with others... When we grasp this sense of our call, we are set free for a Sabbath way of life: a profound resting in the Kingdom's grace instead of perpetual struggle to "do our work"; an endless ceasing, by grace, of those attitudes and actions and attachments that hinder the Kingdom's reign; an exuberant feasting that radiates the Kingdom's grace-full splendor; an

ardent embracing of the Kingdom's gracious purposes."
(pp13-14)

It is difficult to critique Marva's basic framework – it is not only carefully thought-through and deliberately articulated, it is obviously contained within a gospel premise and the uniqueness of Christ for salvation. Sometimes she is hard to grasp – I still don't quite know exactly what she means by even the four section headings of "resting," "ceasing," "feasting," and "embracing." Sometimes her opinions on various experiences in the world (particularly with regard to frustrations with technology etc.) reflects her own perspective more than universal truth. Yet this thoroughly experiential, practical, spiritual, liturgical, contemplative book is well grounded and useful.

Indeed, this book is immensely practical. I found reading it to be an experience that was full of little "convictions" prodding my attitudes and actions and routines with quiet whispers of "does this match what you believe?" When I read a book and something strikes me I often make a note of it inside the front cover – in this book my notes have spilled over on to the title page.

I would recommend this book to any Christian – although I would probably qualify that by saying any Christian who is *serious* about serving God in "the church and the world." Without that inner motivation this book would be some nice thoughts, with that inner motivation this book does a prophetic task – speaking truth in ways that bug you till you take stock and consider not just the truth, but its application in all of life.

Perhaps the best way to communicate an overview of this book is to share some of these gems and give you a taste of this well-rounded meal that Marva Dawn offers to Christians who wish to live like they are just that – Christians.

With regard to patience:

“That is why we need utmost patience – or perhaps we should resurrect the old rendering, “long-suffering.” It will cost us loads of long hours, myriads of conversations, scads of sorrow, masses of disappointment and frustrations to engage people in the instruction and mission of the Kingdom. The only thing that makes it worth the bother is that the Kingdom is the only treasure worth having.” (p18)

With regard to being spiritual (I recently stole this concept for use in a sermon series on Ephesians 1):

“I use the word spiritual... not as it is usually used in English to denote some nebulous entity, some obscure dimension of us beyond the material. If we think of every aspect in our connection to God who is Spirit, as the whole spiritual sweep of our lives, then the term spiritual encompasses everything, for all of us relates to God – intelligence, attitudes, talents, affections, body, actions, our whole being.” (p40)

With regard to our direction in life:

“It is a beautiful mystery that we never quite know in what directions we might be led as we embrace our call... Mother Teresa was once asked about her summons to care for the needy, and she responded that she was not called to serve the poor. She insisted that she was simply called to follow Jesus and that’s where He led her.” (p65)

The point of church:

“...it is crucial that we keep remembering that the Church’s true work is not therapy. We have trouble recalling that because our society’s excessive consumerism is rooted in the significant turn that Philip Rieff documented in his well-

known aphorism, "Religious man was born to be saved, [contemporary] psychological man is born to be pleased." In other words, culturally, we have turned away from knowing that we are sinners who need a Rescuer from beyond ourselves to believing that we should be made comfortable and happy. We can see the effects of this societal expectation in those who complain that a worship service did not "uplift them." Wouldn't it surprise them to be reminded that its purpose is to kill them so that they can be resurrected into an entirely new creation?" (p132)

About the joy of adversity:

"Somewhere I heard the quotation, "You can acquire anything in solitude except character." We need the whole community to test us, to refine us, to enable us to develop aspects of character including strength, kindness, and wisdom that we cannot gain without trials. We all need critics and rebukers, malcontents and misfits – even if (especially if?) these cause us pain – so that our feasting is virtuous and honorable." (p219)

About community as a vehicle of evangelism (a concept that we've considered a lot at Connections):

"...What if churches recognized that the major means for evangelism in the early Church was the remarkable unity existing among individual members in the community of saints and the harmony between what they believed and what they lived? In other words, they were a Body of people demonstrating an alternative/biblical manner of being." (p236)

And finally, on the slowness of ministry (something all church planters should consider):

"Many people want to do ministry in a grand, glamorous way.

But the work of spreading the gospel happens with continued, often hidden engagement over the long haul. We can't nurture faith or live it in the world in one dramatic quick fix of heroism; it is more like a long pregnancy (sometimes years long

!) till Christ is birthed in others (see Gal. 4:19-20)."
(p257)

