Review of Interpreting Your World: Five Lenses for Engaging Theology and Culture by Justin Ariel Bailey

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Book Review

*Interpreting Your World: Five Lenses for Engaging Theology and Culture*

By Justin Ariel Bailey
Baker Academic, 2022
192 pages
US$21.99

Reviewed by John E. Rife, Jr., who holds a Master of Theological Studies from Palmer Theological Seminary and is a Theology and Apologetics doctoral candidate at Liberty University.

In theology, we wrestle with eternal truths acted out daily in ever-changing cultures. Every now and then, it is helpful to engage material that embraces the timeless Gospel of Jesus Christ and that shows how the gospel interacts with—and breaks through—the trends of the day. Readers are indebted to Justin Ariel Bailey for accomplishing just that.

This book attempts to make theological concepts understandable in modern contexts, not with syncretism but with relativism. It makes sense of the gospel in the surrounding cultures not by discarding vital cultural elements but by transforming them in light of the good news of Jesus Christ. Bailey uses five dimensions, 1) Meaning, 2) Power, 3) Ethical, 4) Religious, and 5) Aesthetic, as a means of embracing the valued components of the world in which we live. He explains how Christian life impacts the culture through each of these five dimensions.

The book is filled with many of Bailey’s personal encounters and experiences as he becomes very transparent. It is not that the book serves as a confessional, but he uses his experiences to offer practical,
experiential direction to the reader. Bailey uses terms familiar to modern audiences, such as "going viral." Because of the frequency that these contemporary expressions are used in the book, it is hard to say how long the concepts will be relative in a quickly changing culture. Still, for today’s Christians, the material is undoubtedly beneficial.

This does not mean that the content lacks timeless concepts. For example, Bailey explains, “The Pharisees said, if you are clean, you can be with us; Jesus said, be with me, and you will become clean” (37-38). Such a truth can be applied and seen in any culture where there is an elite group that claims who is out and who is in.

The book comes with a shining endorsement from Bailey’s former instructor, Kevin Vanhoozer of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Vanhoozer states, “The five lenses allow us not simply to stay on the surface of the water but to plumb its depths” (xii). He goes on to say, “What is at stake in the dialogue between theology and culture that Justin here engages is nothing less than the shape of our discipleship” (xiii).

Bailey boldly engages concepts familiar to modern Western minds, such as critical theory. He states,

On the surface, critical theories seem to work from a similar starting point as the Scriptures (recognition of oppression) and seek similar outcomes (justice). But as we dig deeper, we find significant differences in how oppression, liberation, and justice are defined, as well as in the story of the world that lies beneath these definitions (44).

Bailey’s book can appeal to nearly all audiences, from the layperson to the academic, because it seeks to engage culture thoughtfully, though without sacrificing truths found in the Bible. The author’s work challenges the reader to face outward. This is not a book on personal spiritual growth but a book on attaining spiritual maturity to facilitate effective transmission of the good news of Jesus Christ and make it meaningful in the theological garden in which such seeds of truth are planted. It is a book that concerns itself with personal character growth for the benefit of others. According to Bailey, “Our answerability to God does not clear us of accountability to others, but it does relativize all human judgments” (78). As for challenges that inspire the reader to look beyond his or her own cultural and spiritual comfort zones, he writes,

We walk humbly (Mic. 6:8), in the name of our God, the One who has joined us at our table, sharing our food, and suffering our violence. His continuing presence interrogates our practices. For though Jesus is
not averse to flipping the tables (John 2:13–17), his more common practice is to sit at them, asking penetrating questions. When Jesus sits at the table, he draws our attention to who is sitting in the place of honor and who has been left out. He exposes our attempts to be in the center and to avoid the voices of those on the margins (Luke 14:8–14). And he reminds us that God’s kingdom runs in the opposite direction of every human culture on earth: toward the outsiders (83).

This is indeed a great reminder of how we can take the character and example of Jesus Christ into our surrounding culture and live out an eternal truth in very fluid times. *Interpreting Your World* gives readers insight not only into how to interpret scripture, but how to live it out, and how to do so with a Christ-centered engagement. This is a book that I would recommend to readers of nearly any Christian background with nearly any level of educational experience.