

Van der Merwe, Chris N 2017. *Splendors of Godly Love*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock. ISBN: 978-1-5326-1760-7

Chris van der Merwe, Professor Emeritus of Afrikaans and Dutch Literature at the University of Cape Town, has enjoyed a long and distinguished career as a literary scholar during which he has done pioneering work on, amongst other things, the intersections between narrative, trauma, memory, identity and place in the South African context. Since his retirement from teaching in 2009, he has continued to publish on these themes, but have also, interestingly, been writing books of a more theological nature, dealing with different aspects of the Christian faith. One of these books, *Die Wonder van Goddelike Liefde* (2014), has recently been reworked into English and published under the title, *Splendors of Godly Love* (2017). In what follows, I will offer a few thoughts on this book in which Van der Merwe explores various Christian values, including that of Christian love.

In the book's introduction, Van der Merwe states that knowingly or unknowingly, we are all in search of values, that is, of ideas or guidelines whereby we can live and make sense of our lives. Many views exist, of course, on what these values should be, and in our materialistic society wealth is often held up as the supreme value to strive for, but for Van der Merwe, much can (still) be said for the particular values that are espoused in the Bible – values such as faith, hope, righteousness, truth, joy, humility and, above all, love. While these values may seem outdated in our modern world and have, unfortunately, often been misrepresented and abused in the past, Van der Merwe believes that they should – especially in our present hour – be reconsidered, by turning anew to the biblical texts in which they are presented to us. And this is what he sets out to do in this book, not firstly as a theologian interested in what he describes as “theological controversies”, but as a literary scholar trained in analysing and giving close readings of texts (xi-xii).

Beginning, then, with “faith”, Van der Merwe takes the reader on a journey of rediscovery, in which the various values mentioned above are discussed. The general pattern that is followed is to first comment on how these values are seen and defined in our modern world, before delving into the

biblical texts to see how they can be differently construed, especially in view of present-day realities. While Van der Merwe provides captivating readings of passages from both the Hebrew Scriptures and the larger New Testament, he focuses most extensively on the Gospel texts, since, for him, Christ – the Word who became flesh – serves as the ultimate example of how these values should be embodied (53). “For Christians”, he writes, “ethical thinking does not begin with us, but is a response to God’s revelation in Jesus, disclosing who God is and what God expects from us” (126). For Van der Merwe, to live a Christian life – which speaks of the values discussed throughout this book – thus means to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord, and to be increasingly united to him, through the working of the Spirit and God’s grace (98).

As Van der Merwe believes that the various values, he discusses are all “interconnected” and related to the “wholeness of God” (11, 39), the book moves from one section to another in a seamless manner, and ultimately culminates in a final reflection on what he calls the “central Christian value of love” (xiii). Like Dante’s voyage in the *Divine Comedy*, Van der Merwe’s journey also, then, ends with love – the love which, according to him, undergirds, holds together and makes possible all the other biblical values, whether it be “hope”, “joy” or “truth” (125). Building on the insights of C.S. Lewis – who he, as literary scholar, clearly feels a special kinship to – Van der Merwe sees Christian love as a love which is focused outwards, a love which is willing to “suffer and endure” for the sake of the other, a love which does not discriminate, but brings about redemption, hope and life – especially for those who do not deserve it (112-4). For Van der Merwe, it is thus, once more, in and through Christ, the incarnate Word, that this value of love is revealed in and to the world. “Love”, Van der Merwe writes, “became flesh in the person of Jesus – in the narrative of his life, his teaching, his death and his resurrection” (126). It is, accordingly, in opening our hearts to the love revealed in Christ, Van der Merwe holds, that we are also transformed and enabled to embody the “splendors of divine love” in our own lives, which involves all the other values mentioned throughout the book.

What I particularly appreciate about *Splendors of Godly Love* is not only its insightful content (especially when it comes to the exposition of biblical texts), but also the way the content is presented by Van der Merwe. Many books are written about Christian values, but what makes this

book a true gift to the reader is the style and form of Van der Merwe's theological writing. In theology – as in literature – style and form matter, and can, in itself, convey meaning and further augment and exemplify the author's message. This is, to my mind, what happens when one reads Van der Merwe's text. The simplicity and poetic elegance of Van der Merwe's writing gently invite the reader in, and indeed come to signify something of the very kindness, generosity and, indeed, love described in the book. Some might perhaps feel that the book is too optimistic and does not give enough attention to the challenging and even problematic dimensions of that which is discussed, including, of course, the various biblical texts themselves (even though Van der Merwe does continually point out that when it comes to matters of ethics, and, moreover, to matters of God, things are never straightforward). Given, however, the troubled times in which we live, an extended meditation on what can be described as the beauty of Godly love is perhaps exactly what is needed to inspire us to “resist evil”, serve others, and help bring about “the kingdom of God on earth” (117–26).

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