

Book Reviews

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Mark Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (IVP, 2015), 191 pages, \$20.

In recent years, transgender ethics have been hotly debated among Christians, as public institutions and large franchise companies change policies and procedures to accommodate transgender individuals. As traditional understandings of gender identity are challenged, the church must wrestle with the theological conviction that humans are made in God's image as male and female, while also hearing the personal narratives of those whose experience does not fit neatly into these categories. Mark Yarhouse is a licensed clinical psychologist and professor of psychology at Regent University. In *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, he offers his theological, scientific, and clinical expertise to the church as it wrestles with questions about sexual identity.

Yarhouse first introduces the reader to relevant definitions and categories. Gender dysphoria is one of many different lived realities included under the broader transgender umbrella. It is included in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the authoritative guide for mental health providers. The DSM-V describes those with gender dysphoria as those who "experience distress associated with the incongruence wherein one's psychological and emotional gender identity does not match one's biological sex" (quoted in Yarhouse, p. 20).

Yarhouse goes on to explore biblical texts that seem to support the

integrity and sacredness of gender identity corresponding to one's biological sex. He then presents additional passages from Scripture that offer counter-testimony and open the door to complexity and inclusivity. Yarhouse develops three distinct frameworks for the most common approaches to gender dysphoria: integrity, disability, and diversity. The integrity framework ascribes a sacredness to biological sex, which is therefore to be honored and upheld. The disability framework points to the complexity of a fallen world and sees gender dysphoria as a non-moral reality. In the diversity framework, gender identity is understood as a broad spectrum, and each diverse expression along this spectrum is to be respected and celebrated. In Yarhouse's view, each framework has something to commend it, and he advocates for an integrated framework that incorporates aspects of all three. His greatest difficulty comes from the diversity framework's deconstruction of gender. Even so he accepts a "weak" form, which he finds superior to the disability framework in its ability to answer questions of identity and meaning.

Yarhouse brings to this contested area a compassionate and reasoned voice that seeks to build a bridge between the evangelical church and those who experience gender dysphoria. Yarhouse uses Scripture to speak to experience, but he is comfortable letting experience inform his reading of Scripture as well. The author validates each person's experience, as he believes that gender identity is not a personal choice but a reality received. He calls Christians and churches to compassion, mercy, and inclusivity: regardless of how a person chooses to manage their gender dysphoria, the church should listen to that person's story and seek to understand their experience.

Understanding Gender Dysphoria is a good introduction to a complex issue, approached through both scientific and theological lenses. Yarhouse is clear that his scope is limited to gender dysphoria and does not address sexual orientation. Still, it would have been helpful if he had clarified how a Christian response to transgender individuals may or may not be the same as a Christian response to those who are gay. This book invites Christians to wrestle with realities of gender and to respond in humility and compassion. It would be an excellent reference for pastors and parents seeking to understand the complex decisions those with gender dysphoria must navigate.

TY GRIGG

Jack Lundbom, *On the Road to Siangyang: Covenant Mission in Mainland China 1890–1949* (Pickwick, 2015), 308 pages, \$36.

The Evangelical Covenant Church's long legacy of overseas mission work may be unfamiliar to those new to the Covenant. After Alaska, China was the second field to which the ECC sent missionaries, beginning in 1890. For many decades, the work in China served as the model for how Covenant mission was done, setting the standard for subsequent missions established in new countries. With careful attention to the details of names, places, and dates, *On the Road to Siangyang* retraces the history of Covenant missions in China, as Lundbom offers a year-by-year account of the first sixty years.

The book's title refers to the location adopted by Covenant missionaries as their nucleus, in the central Chinese province of Hupeh (now Hubei), located on the main road west of Beijing. The city of Fancheng, located across the river from the political center of the Siangyang province, had been an outpost that Hudson Taylor's China Inland Mission had unsuccessfully attempted to open over the previous three years. Through the persistence of early Covenant teachers, doctors, nurses, and missionary clergy, this area grew to include several churches, schools, and hospitals and a seminary that impacted thousands of Chinese believers and their communities.

The collected stories from Covenant missionaries will warm the hearts of many while also raising historiographical questions for some readers, such as, "What motivated the mission strategies chosen in those early days?" Here Lundbom gives us some tantalizing clues. Quoting Covenant historian Karl Olsson, he writes, "Covenant missionary work in China was broadly conceived. [Covenant mission founder Peter] Matson 'wanted a mission which through evangelism, education, and benevolence slowly spread the Gospel and the savor of Christ throughout an entire culture. It was the doctrine of leaven rather than of the bugle blast'" (p. 17). The leaven approached worked, in part due to the great difficulty of communicating back and forth with the Covenant offices in Chicago. We are told that four years passed before there was a single convert. These numbers, however, grew increasingly in the following years. There is no indication that mission directives came from the denominational home office in Chicago, implying a great deal of trust given by the Covenant to its missionaries, a tradition that persists to this day.

Those who read mission history today want to know what can be learned from the past. How are we building on the foundations of our

forebears in mission? Knowing how history was written in its day can give us some insights into what people were thinking when decisions were being made. Primary sources are critically important in reporting history fairly. Perhaps one of the most important documents Lundbom has included is medical missionary Oscar Anderson's firsthand report of his seventy-five days in captivity by rebel soldiers in 1931. Throughout the entire torturous account, Anderson's love for China, its beauty, and its people resounds to God's glory. Surely he represents the culturally sensitive, faith-filled position of many who gave their lives for this work.

The final section of the book traces Lundbom's later visits to China, which will be of interest to those familiar with the earlier stories. We can be grateful for this mission work and for the work of God that continues in the country of China. May we also be found faithful as we seek wisdom in the ways we participate in global service, wherever God is sending us today.

PAUL DE NEUI

Mark Safstrom, *Silliness and Stillness: A History of Covenant Point Bible Camp in Michigan's Upper Peninsula* (Covenant Point Bible Camp, 2017), 130 pages, \$30.

Why does the Evangelical Covenant Church have so many Bible camps, and why do these camps play such a significant role in the denomination? Mark Safstrom's new history of Covenant Point Bible Camp helps answer these questions.

Weaving together themes from prior works on Pietism and Covenant history, Safstrom describes how and why the Upper Michigan Young People's Conference purchased property on Lake Hagerman in 1927 and held their first conference the following year. These young adults were heirs to the Mission Friends' tradition of gathering outdoors in the summertime for a week or two of preaching, singing, Bible study, and "wholesome recreation" (p. 17). Safstrom writes, "The tradition of holding revivals in the summer, with the long days, glorious weather, and picnics with friends amplified the euphoria of the spiritual experiences that people were otherwise gaining from the meetings and singing. This fun factor is not to be discounted as a key emotional aspect of the success of summer camping in supporting the general ministry of revival" (p. 61).

In his history, Safstrom traces the subsequent construction of the camp's buildings (the Tabernacle, dorms, cabins, dining hall), the develop-

ment of its programs, and the additions of youth and family camps. He summarizes these and other changes in the camp program and facilities, “If the Covenant Church was going to be able to retain the second and third generations, they would need to be allowed freedom to develop new forms of summer programming” (p. 14). Safstrom also describes Covenant Point’s 1961 adoption into the Central Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church and its implications for partnering with Covenant Harbor Bible Camp. With a decline in attendance at youth camp in the 1970s, leaders at Covenant Point began new initiatives, turning Covenant Point into a year-round Bible camp and retreat center through the 1978–1979 “Master Plan.”

Safstrom demonstrates that Covenant camps originated with the primary purpose of conversion (“revival”) but were also devoted to the deepening of commitments made to Jesus Christ (“catechism”). He observes, “The core purpose of Bible camp is to present the gospel, yet specifically what this means and how it is accomplished has a long history of development” (p. 64). Safstrom notes how the understanding of conversion has expanded at Covenant Point, especially in the past few decades. “Celebrating Conversion: A Resource for Christian Camps” is included in the text as an appendix. Written by Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom (professor of theology at North Park Theological Seminary) and Erik Strom (ordained Covenant pastor and director of Covenant Point) for the Association of Covenant Camps and Conference Centers, this 2013 document provides an historical and biblical framework for understanding conversion in the Covenant tradition. Safstrom’s chapter on conversion (“The Philosophy of Camping Ministry”) deserves a reading by a wide audience.

Silliness and Stillness is a fine book by an academic historian whose background makes him uniquely qualified to tell the story of Covenant Point. Safstrom, assistant professor of Scandinavian studies at Augustana College, served on staff at Covenant Point and has written extensively about the larger context of Covenant history. Book designer Sandy Nelson did admirable work in this attractive, photo-filled volume. Those with connections to Covenant Point will likely recognize the faces of campers and staff from across the decades. In viewing the photos, the “silliness” referenced in the book’s title becomes evident.

BRYCE NELSON

