

Restoring God's Rep

By Michael Richter

Rethinking God; Undoing the Damage

By Dr. Scott Munger

Living Ink Books, 256 pp., \$14.99

There's a short piece floating on the Net called *Top Ten Reasons Why Men Should Not Be Ordained*. The version I saw rather cleverly takes the logic of common objections to the ordination of women and applies it just as effectively to argue against the ordination of men. I asked my friend why she had posted it, and it turns out she is discovering how much of our religion is extra-Biblical. Well, her exact words were, "It makes me mad!"

I sympathize completely. When I uncover a loaded interpretation of Scripture or flaws from my childhood religious programming, I first feel betrayed. Then I realize how senseless my anger is, absent a deliberate perpetrator.

With *Rethinking God*, Scott Munger is out to correct the errors in religious programming. He seeks to refurbish God's reputation, whether it has been sullied by the self-serving distortions of God's followers or by the slanders of God's enemies. I had great hopes for this project, though in retrospect it is perhaps a hopelessly broad one.

In this single tome, Dr. Munger ranges from describing, from personal experience, the failings of a naturalistic worldview, to mounting full-fledged apologetics against the charges of atheism and pretensions of relativism, to bemoaning the dearth of character in too many publicized church leaders, to condemning the systemic causes of that dearth, to utilizing his professional skills as translator to undermine some of the most cherished and damaging evangelical presuppositions. He's quite capable in each area, but the wide swings from one to the next rather robbed the entire book of focus. I'd be quite content to purchase separate works from him devoted to each subject.

It seems to me that the different sections would appeal to different sorts of readers, so I am at a loss as to what to recommend. Personally, my religious outlook was changed profoundly by two of Munger's exegeses. In the section, *Is God a Heavenly Narcissist?*, he demonstrates that Isaiah 43:6,7 speaks about people being created to *show* God's glory, not to *give* him glory through praise. At another point, he reveals that the verb "take" in the Third Commandment, "Thou shalt not take the Name of the LORD thy God in vaine," means something similar to a wife taking her husband's name and family reputation. It means that a Christ-ian should live a life worthy of the Name he or she has "taken." The restriction to speech turns this fundamental commandment into a legalistic willow switch for berating trivial impiety.

Unhappily, *Rethinking God* seems to have suffered the disservice of having been left orphan by the editorial community. I was constantly distracted by misspellings and poor usage: "Holding the reigns of 'truth'" on p. 2 and "quail to question him" on p. 35. and "a new religion is canvassing the land" on p. 62 and "careen off a cliff" on p. 63. Beyond these

needless embarrassments and probably producing them is a sometime telegraphic style laden with metaphor and cliché. I paused several moments in puzzlement over each clause like “but it does exclude blind faith from the copyright” (p. 3) and “A Christian leader who does not walk with God will chase Saul’s phantoms” (p. 35). Moreover, the book is inflated by many lengthy quotations from Scripture—a few judicious summaries would have made it much more readable. I hope the author finds for his next book an editor who will more tightly define audience and subject matter and challenge him to draw out his thoughts into clearer and more powerful exposition. And proof the thing, for goodness sake.

Representative quotes:

“Another comment about faith—our second hiking shoe. Some people boldly declare that circumstances, especially in early life, determine our core beliefs. In select cases that claim may be true, but no one can prove that it holds universally. Furthermore, the idea cuts itself off at the ankles: We need only ask what circumstances produced someone who believes it. Finally, siblings raised in identical environments often end up with very different views. So neither my faith, nor that of most Communists, arises from external forces. Such forces may push us here or there, but we draw the conclusions. After a long struggle, I came to my own convictions quite willingly, and can explain why. That doesn’t make my faith true, but it does exclude blind fate from the copyright.”
p. 3

“More important (sic), the verb in the final phrase ‘prepared for destruction’ is an ambiguous form in Greek. It can mean either ‘were prepared by someone else’ or ‘prepared themselves.’ The difference is huge. English usage tends to push our understanding of ‘prepared’ to the passive ‘were prepared.’ The story of Pharaoh, however, and the whole tenor of Paul’s writings here and elsewhere suggest that such people prepare themselves...”
p. 100

“The Bible consistently teaches that God will not judge us by what we claim to believe, the doctrines we profess, or the religious rituals we perform. How much less by what we have merely heard. God will judge us upon how and why we conduct ourselves in life.”
p. 141