

‘Seeing Good, Doing Evil’ by Mike Russell

Review by Tim Patrick

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This is a small but vital volume that has grown out of a postgraduate thesis. The first thing to say about ‘Seeing Good and Doing Evil’ is that it is an *engaging* book. When I first heard Mike talk through the material that would find its way into this book, I was really engaged by it. I was engaged because it tackles one of the really-big, important, and commonly asked — yet often poorly answered — of the Christian faith. It is a question derivative of the great question about the relationship between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility; one that focuses on the human side of the equation. The way Mike frames it is –

If neither general revelation, or those truths about God we can learn by observing the natural world, nor natural law, or those ethical absolutes that we can learn by observing the natural world] are available to people reliably, how can God justly judge them for their ignorance, and hold them morally culpable for failing to live according to that revelation which they cannot reliably access?

Given that human beings are finite and do not have complete and pure knowledge of God, or of every right and every wrong, how can God hold them morally accountable? To put the issue more pointedly and empathetically: Surely it’s just not fair that God would punish someone for making moral errors when it’s plainly impossible for them to know everything that he considers to be good or bad—and this is especially the case when we recognize that great philosophers and brilliant ethicists and religious leaders of all ages and from all faiths can’t offer us an agreed position on all of these things. This is one of the big questions that faces anyone who wants to think through the Christian world view, and also anyone who is personally wrestling with what God has revealed in the Scriptures. Mike’s work is engaging because it tackles this question head on.

The book is also engaging because it is fresh, it’s broad and it’s rigorous in the ways it sets about answering the question. As we would expect, Mike grounds his answers in the Bible. But he doesn’t just grab a handful of proof texts, nor does he simply wheel out the received—but often clumsy—interpretations of key passages. He brings his own careful and close study to the critical texts. Mike’s biblical focus is upon Romans 1 and 2, and I was so encouraged reading the chapter where he deals with these texts exegetically. A perhaps surprising thing about the book of Romans is that while we might fairly claim that it has sat squarely at the centre of Protestant biblical theology for five centuries, there is a lot in it that remains poorly understood, very difficult to interpret, and— frankly—too often just fudged. Personally I’ve been struggling with Romans 5 over the past couple of years and I’m not at all convinced that it says exactly what we commonly think it says—but neither am I sure that I have

been able to come to any better reading of it! Romans 9–11 is hard. And so is Romans 1–3, and, again, I am not convinced that some of the standard interpretations of those chapters are correct. But I was pretty much convinced by Mike's work. This is a 'new take' for me but, one that has great fidelity to the text as written and a great explanatory power. I actually think Russel's book is worth reading simply for his careful work on Romans 1–2. He doesn't fudge it or force every verse to fit into a pre-determined theological package. He uses careful exegesis to present a coherent exposition of the text as written. That is helpful in its own right, and it enormously strengthens the case of his book.

What also strengthens his case is the fact that Mike is not bound by a single discipline, but instead works ably across a range of fields. It is one thing to tackle a part of Romans well, but another thing to do that, and then to jump over into psychology, ethical theory and academic apologetics, and to be similarly responsible with each of them too. This is not only impressive, but also essential, because a topic like the one Mike Russel is addressing cannot be confined within the limits of our own areas of natural interest or specialisation. To pin it down properly, we need to move into the different fields in which its footprints are found. Pastors, of course, ought to be good at this sort of thing. They cannot only be experts in one or two areas like biblical studies or preaching, but also need to understand psychology, politics, current affairs, management, culture, and more. It makes sense to me that pastors do well at addressing multifaceted questions.

Finally, what you will find in this book is excellent interaction with great minds. As he works across the different fields, Mike speaks to their experts and does a commendable job of both understanding them, and then appropriately critiquing them too. Luther's thought is embraced at some points, and checked at others. Calvin is quoted, and left aside. More recent writers like Doug Moo are studied, and corrected. Alister McGrath is considered, and re-considered. Mike interacts well with these kinds of important voices, drawing much from them without being enslaved to them, and disagreeing without point-scoring. This is strong scholarship; moving towards the truth, rather than hopping on a bandwagon or flying tribal flags.

I'm conscious that I am sounding very much like someone hopping on the bandwagon and flying Mike's flag, and while I'm very happy to do so, I will take this chance to offer just one suggestion for where I'd love to see Mike further develop his thinking for us. If there's one thing I would like to see added to the book, it would be a chapter or section focused on pneumatology. How does the Holy Spirit affect our intuitions? How does the Spirit help us to interpret and internalise 'Legal Knowledge'? Perhaps a follow up volume is in order, or a bonus section for the second edition of this one!

That quibble aside, the book is well-worth reading. It is engaging, fresh, broad, and rigorous. But even beyond what I have already noted, it is a blessing to us too. It is a blessing to us because it is faithful. Not only is Mike careful with the Scriptures, but he is also clearly committed to the gospel and that gospel concern is felt throughout the work. It is not a mere academic exercise; something for scholars and theological 'boffins' to delight in. It is a work that maintains the focus of Christ's church. The

question is, after all, apologetically imperative. It is a question that causes some people to struggle in the faith, and Mike Russel treats it as that sort of personal, evangelistic question, and not just an intellectual puzzle. Chapter 6 is entitled 'Applications for Confident Presentation of the Gospel'. How wonderful to have a book like this consciously written with the end goal of seeing the gospel of Jesus presented with greater confidence! If only every theological text had the same concern! And it's not just that Russel has this heart, but he also offers some very concrete, practical suggestions as to how we might approach our apologetic task—most importantly the reminder to treat different types of questions differently.

On that point, I think the distinction Mike makes between arguing for the gospel but not arguing for the Natural Law is absolutely critical for today's church. Far too often we hear, on the one hand, Christians making arguments for things which ought to be intuited and which are demeaned by argument: the existence of God, for example. Of course, the problem with using this evidentialist approach for these questions is that doing so admits that commonly accepted things ought to be subject to debate. It is a profoundly foolish quest. On the other hand, we hear some Christians speaking of such things as 'lifestyle evangelism' through which they somehow think the particulars of the gospel will be intuited by their associates when, in fact, the message of Jesus needs to be carefully recounted and passed on explicitly. Mike's book is a blessing because it helps us sharpen up these essential evangelistic distinctions, and his work actually helps us see why our focus should be squarely on the gospel.

So, when one finishes reading *Seeing Good Doing Evil*, one will not only feel more informed about God's justice, human moral responsibility and the ways the Bible explains our culpability for what we don't know. One will also feel more ready to speak the gospel cleanly and directly to a world that doesn't think about the questions the ways that we do, but that desperately needs the message of Jesus to renew minds, hearts, wills and souls for his greater glory.