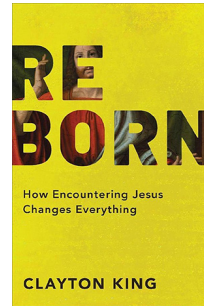


Book Review

Clayton King.
*Reborn: How Encountering Jesus
Changes Everything*
Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2020.
pp. 211, £11.99. ISBN: 978-0801019609.

Reviewed by Matthew Wong, King's Evangelical Divinity School



The biblical and contemporary examples compiled by King in *Reborn* are witness to the transformative power of Christ. King writes passionately, advocating a genuine encounter with the risen Christ as the only authentic answer to man's spiritual needs. In an age where immediate and superficial 'fixes' to life's problems are readily espoused, King eschews any attempt at effecting positive, lasting change apart from a genuine salvific encounter with Jesus. This is his clarion call and the beating heart of the book.

As a teaching pastor and evangelist, King has produced a practical and heart-felt exhortation to trust in Christ and to experience His power and mercy. King's work, though highly readable and non-technical, is replete with biblical and personal insights, challenging applications, and acute observations on mankind's fallen human nature. In writing the book, King acknowledges an indebtedness to numerous scholars who have "inspired and educated him on the person of Jesus and the culture in which he lived" (p. 211). Examples include conservative evangelical scholars F.F. Bruce and D.A. Carson, alongside 'Emerging church' proponent Eugene Peterson (author of 'The Message') and others who may be sympathetic to the movement. In keeping with the book's accessible style, no literature citations or references are included.

Every chapter, except chapter thirteen, features a New Testament figure who

encountered Christ and is thematically linked to contemporary testimonies of God's intervention and sovereign grace, thus demonstrating His immutable nature. For both the biblical and contemporary characters, King provides some background information on the person's life prior to meeting Christ, explains how life changed following the encounter, and presents a central message that is applicable to modern-day lives. The book's focus on salvation and its lucid writing style would suit non-Christians as well as recent converts seeking encouragement that God is still working mightily in people's lives today. The book, however, is not an apology for the Christian faith, and though it is an uplifting and encouraging read, hardened sceptics may require more reasoned argumentation in support of key doctrinal tenets to engender biblical faith.

A brief summary of each chapter's message is as follow: [1] Nicodemus (God can save even the most 'unlikely' people) [2] the woman at the well (no one is beyond God's saving grace) [3] the feeding of the five thousand (God accepts even our pitiable offerings when surrendered in faith) [4] the woman caught in the act of adultery (as God forgave the woman, grace must be shown towards others) [5] Zacchaeus (God is patient and pursues the unsaved with the Gospel) [6] the woman with the issue of blood (God is able to heal miraculously) [7] the thief on the cross (it is never too late to receive God's forgiveness) [8] Judas (an exhortation to

be reborn, and not to shy away from evangelism) [9] Lazarus (God has authority over death) [10] Jesus' Emmaus road appearance ('the benefit of doubt') [11] the martyrdom of Stephen (the cost of wholehearted discipleship) [12] Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet (God is pleased when His children give sacrificially/generously) [13] God is able to deliver people from occultism and bring about reconciliation between family members.

In demonstrating how people today are still encountering God in powerful and transformative ways, King is, at times, complicit in misappropriating the historical-grammatical context when pairing biblical/New Testament examples with contemporary parallels. For example, King couples the boy's role in the feeding of the five thousand with the committing to the Lord of a drug addict who had 'little to offer' (p. 53). Whilst faith might pose a common bond, King is equating the boy's willingness to offer up his food to Christ (Jn. 6:9-11) with the spiritual regeneration of a friend battling drug addiction. This is problematic as the miracle focuses on what Jesus did with the meagre provisions (Jn. 6:12f), not on the boy's act of 'selflessly' offering his food, thereby weakening the spiritual similarities between the characters in the accounts. A more accurate comparison would focus on God's ability to use what little is brought to Him in faith, vis-à-vis the five barley loaves and two fish and the (ex-)drug addict whose life was transformed by Christ.

Such tenuous comparisons are seen elsewhere, for example, in the discussion on Jesus' forgiveness of the woman caught in adultery (Jn. 8:1-11) which is preceded by an account of a black woman who came to the aid of a KKK activist at a violent rally (pp. 67-70). King's reductive pairing of the two accounts overlooks the central message of John 8:1-

11, namely Jesus' sharp rebuke of religious hypocrisy/self-righteousness (v. 7) and His willingness to forgive the penitent sinner (v. 11). Whilst grace and forgiveness feature prominently in both accounts, King divorces these qualities from the historical-grammatical context of the scribes and Pharisees' religious hypocrisy, resulting in an artificial link being constructed between the biblical and contemporary accounts. The farfetchedness of other contemporary parallels stems from King's decision to re-couch the biblical examples in more familiar 21st century settings, inevitably leading to imperfect analogies/contemporary 'equivalents.' That said, despite some contextual discrepancies, King's central message in each chapter is largely authentic, discernible and scripturally rooted, though many comments and insights are applicable to the life of faith and discipleship, not solely to the act of regeneration/salvation as the book's title would imply.

In his discussion on the 'benefit of doubt' (pp. 159-174) in chapter ten, King would be wise to define the type of doubt he is referring to. Is he referring to doubt as sincere questioning, double-mindedness, or ardent scepticism? Whilst doubt certainly afflicts all Christians in varying measure and at various times, nowhere in Scripture is doubt, unless manifesting as frankness in pouring out one's heart to God, presented as a positive quality to be embraced (Jas. 1:6). In a book aimed primarily at unbelievers (note the sinner's prayer on p. 210), extolling the 'benefit of [undefined] doubt' appears a little unwise. Further grounds for misunderstanding are provided by King's exhortation to do "something extravagant for Jesus ... [to] go for it. Give big. Hold nothing back. Lose your cool, embarrass yourself, break the rules, and worship!" (p. 204). Building on the example of how Mary anointed Jesus'

feet with nard (Jn. 12:3) and the actions of a Kenyan Christian who selflessly gave her last meal to King on a missionary trip (pp. 200-4), such an exhortation risks inciting new believers to engage in spiritual grandstanding. Scripture reminds us that giving should be done secretly and with a willing heart (Matt. 6:4; 2 Cor. 9:6-8).

Reborn, however, is a timely reminder that in today's sin scourged world, God is all-powerful, sovereign and transforming fallen human natures. By pairing New Testament 'Christ encounters' with contemporary retellings of Christian 'rebirths', some salvific links are tenuous, laboured and contextually strained. That aside, King provides much in the way of encouragement for believers and in emphasising the limitless depth of God's grace and forgiveness may well draw unbelievers to the cross in faith. However, by appealing to both believers and unbelievers, the book runs the risk of failing to maximise its evangelical

capital whilst also lacking theological depth to fully enrich a broad Christian readership.

Whilst recent years have witnessed a proliferation in the number of popular books detailing remarkable testimonies of God's miraculous power, a key distinctive of *Reborn* is King's decision to anchor contemporary testimony in the biblical witness. By interweaving personal and recorded testimony with biblical examples of Christ's work, the reader is encouraged to gain a biblical perspective on salvation and the ensuing life of faith. Whilst King presents little fresh theological content, *Reborn* is a useful and encouraging devotional read for new Christians. King is to be commended for asserting the pre-eminence of biblical salvation, or what he would term being 'reborn', over fleeting religious experience and superficial spirituality. He does so powerfully and convincingly, leaving the reader once again in awe of God's grace, love and mercy.

