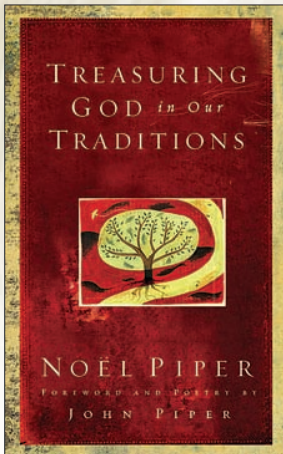




TREASURING GOD IN OUR TRADITIONS

REVIEWED BY NICOLE STARLING



Treasuring God in Our Traditions

Noël Piper and John Piper
Wheaton: Crossway, 2003

As a wife and mother of three children under the age of five years, I think about my family, and families in general, a lot. I am always looking for guidance from God's word and from other Christians with wisdom to share. One extremely helpful source has been a book written by Noël Piper, *Treasuring God in Our Traditions* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003). Having enjoyed the book, having tried to apply its ideas in my family, and having written about it on my blog (www.168hrs.blogspot.com) I was asked to review it for CASE Magazine.

As the title suggests, the book is about the development of Christian family traditions. In the context of an avowedly post-Christian society, 'family traditions' have a function that is more critical than ever before, both within our families and in our mission to the wider society.

Traditions create, preserve and express culture. Now that the culture we live in is no longer even nominally Christian, we can expect that the gulf between the traditions of a Christian family and the traditions of the surrounding culture will become wider and wider.

As that cultural gap widens, basic

Christian faithfulness will require us to be conscious and deliberate in forming and preserving the traditions that will shape the culture of our families. Gone are the days (if they were ever more than an illusion!) when we could unthinkingly absorb the traditions and patterns of life that we saw in the culture around us and make them the traditions of our families.

The importance of this for our task of passing on the gospel to our children and grandchildren is obvious, but it has an importance beyond the family as well.

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The task of apologetics involves more than just clever individuals mounting logical arguments that defend Christian beliefs and expose the flaws in alternative belief systems. The New Testament (eg. Titus 2:1-10) calls us not only to defend the gospel with our ideas but also to adorn the gospel by the lives and families and communities that we create.

A crucial way we can contribute to this broader apologetic task is through the example of family culture and traditions that critique the culture and traditions of the wider society. This requires:

- a. That our families have a culture of their own;
- b. That this culture is consciously, deliberately Christian; and
- c. That our families are not insular and selfish but visible and hospitable.

Because, until recently, social traditions have been 'Christian' traditions, this is

an area that a lot of Christians haven't given much thought. Noël Piper's book is a great help in remedying this deficit in our thinking.

Piper's interest in the 'traditions' of families is not really about the cuteness or the warm nostalgic glow they can create; what she is chiefly interested in is the way they can serve the larger task of "laying up God's words in our hearts and passing his words to the next generation" (p. 26). She writes with warmth and urgency about the importance of

developing everyday habits and ways of marking special occasions that communicate to the children growing up within a family that the God of the gospel is at the centre of the family's life.

But her concern also extends beyond the borders of the family. Piper reminds her readers:

We need to remember, too, that when our traditions are displaying the Treasure of our lives, he is there to be seen by everyone who comes within our circle. Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5: 16). God wants our family and others to give glory to him because they've seen his light through us. Paul says we should be "children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life" (Philippians 2: 15-16).

Much of the book is made up of material that is unique and particular to Noël

Piper's own family—poems written by her husband John for their children's birthdays, hymns sung for each child and family recipes. Whilst it would be foolish to try to slavishly emulate them all, I still enjoyed the 'worked example' they provided of one family's attempt to create a God-centred, grace-saturated family culture.

Particularly interesting for me were her descriptions of what her family did to celebrate the big, annual occasions (particularly Christmas and Easter). While we haven't adopted all the Piper family practices for these occasions, her

approach to these traditions gave us a framework around which we could make our own traditions. For example, I always knew that I didn't want Christmas to be about Santa and presents, but Noël Piper helped me to think about positive ways I could make it special for the kids while teaching them about Jesus, gratitude and generosity.

As with most books, I didn't find everything uniformly convincing. For example, I was not persuaded by the theology of worship that undergirds the final chapter of the book, in which the language of 'worship' is used for the

ritual gathering of God's people in the 'sanctuary' of the church building, and the atmospherics of the Sunday church service are depicted as the conduit for the congregation members' encounter with God. But I was thoroughly convinced by her arguments for the importance of the overall theme, and I loved the genuineness and humanity of the way she illustrated it with examples from her own family. I hope that God will use our family and countless other families who read the book to radiate a similar warmth and light in the context in which we live. ©

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census related to Jesus' estimated date of birth. The birth narratives are indeed in scholars' eyes the least historically credible parts of the gospels. Most scholars believe that Luke got it wrong in this instance, although this is still not certain. However, Dawkins provides no indication of the number of times that Luke gets it right. Luke has left behind a large number of descriptions of people, places and events that can now be checked. In the overwhelming number of cases Luke has been shown to be correct. Hence in this case, Dawkins is faithful to scholarly opinion on the census issue, but he provides a misleading impression by being selective in his evidence.

Where there is smoke there is fire. Something happened in 1st century Palestine that requires an explanation. Real scholars scour all of the information sources to try and find out what actually happened. Dawkins' approach is radically different. His agenda is to assert that it is a fairy tale, so he can ignore the evidence. At the end of this chapter, Dawkins dismisses the most scrutinised texts on the planet as fiction and decides not to consider the Bible as evidence for deity for the rest of the book. However, Dawkins' small contribution on this subject contains numerous errors and flawed arguments. He is far less reliable than Luke. Shouldn't the rest of *The*

God Delusion be dismissed instead?

It would take a book to evaluate all of Dawkins' arguments. Indeed, at least one already has been written (*The Dawkins Delusion* by Alistair McGrath). My general observations are that *The God Delusion* contains a lot of factual errors and uses evidence in a very selective and biased way. It is rhetoric rather than a balanced scholarly presentation. He is not

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interested in finding or communicating the truth. His only agenda is to throw mud and hope that some of it sticks. The *God Delusion* has very little science in it and the vast majority of the material is outside Dawkins' area of expertise. On the other hand, *The God Delusion* is well-written and I found it an interesting read. At times he shows good grace. He bemoans biblical ignorance and acknowledges the contribution of the bible to our culture and language.

The God Delusion will please those who agree with him and I expect it will affect some people's beliefs. However, I find it interesting that the Skeptics are so ready to provide uncritical affirmation. Two of the Skeptic's core values are to test

and to doubt, but that is a two-edged sword. Shouldn't testing and doubting be applied to all views, whether you like them or not? Religious people are not the only ones who suffer from wishful thinking.

As for me, I remain deluded.

Even though there are many weaknesses in Dawkins' book, it is important to engage with writers who are critical of our faith. Where he has

raised an interesting argument, then these should be addressed.

I believe that Dawkins' argument that God is improbable should be addressed in a thorough manner rather than dismissing it as another version of the 'Who made God?' argument.

Our faith's enemies provide great opportunities for apologetic responses. Richard Dawkins has placed a number of issues on the table and has raised public interest. This provides us with an opportunity to be heard. We should study these issues so that we are "prepared to give a reason". ©

END NOTES

1 This paper was published as a Forum article, substantially in its current form, in *The Skeptic*, 27(2).