Review for Douglas Pett (2015) The Healing Tradition of the New Testament

Although this was published in 2015, Douglas Pett died in 2005, leaving this collection of his thoughts based on many years’ work as a healthcare chaplain. He saw with a rising interest in healing and spirituality, a tension between faith and reality, and with little theology to support or guide it. Much of this book is based upon the findings of a much earlier book, Nellie B. Woods’ (1958) ‘The healings of the Bible’. She identified very different approaches to healing on the part of the New Testament writers, including a general absence of healing from the epistles, and very different treatments of healings in each of the four gospels.

Douglas Pett followed a broadly similar approach and arrives at some challenging conclusions.

That some of these conclusions are sweeping, is very clear. Some well-argued points are made, but then stretched to make their conclusion. For example, in seeking to dismiss ‘raising’ miracles, Douglas Pett is far too literalistic with Jesus’ explanation of Jairus’ daughter as ‘only sleeping’. His views on psychosomatic illness and a holistic approach to illness are fair enough, but taken too far in seeing them as explaining every condition that Jesus encountered. Pett also has a spectacularly low opinion of Matthew and Luke, including effectively accusing them of skewing the evidence, if not tampering with it, and his championing of the Eucharist as virtually the sole legitimate vehicle for a healing ministry even has his friend and former colleague, Rt Revd George Hacker, gently disagreeing in his Afterword at the end of the book.

So yes, New Testament Scholars – from all theological perspectives – might find plenty of scope for correcting Douglas Pett’s conclusions.

But perhaps surprisingly, this doesn’t mean that Douglas Pett didn’t believe in the miraculous. Alongside all the above, is a clear faith in Jesus as the Incarnate Logos, who performed more-than-human healings in support of his primary goal of proclaiming and providing salvation in its fullest sense. But in viewing healing as subordinate to this primary goal, and performed only within this context, other instances of healing, whether by the apostles, or by Jesus himself, are effectively dismissed, or at best seen as anomalous.

So what are the strengths of this book?

* It does set out the different emphases on healing in the different parts of the New Testament, and begin to explore the Early Church’s understanding and expectations of healing.
* It does make some sense of why Jesus was often a reluctant healer, or at least shunned publicity.
* It does recognise the existence of illness and Paul’s non-miraculous approach to it, giving some balance to expectations that everyone should be healed of everything, and a role for chaplaincy alongside the medical profession.
* And it points to how the different New Testament writers not only had different perspectives and audiences, but also different theological insights.

In conclusion, I found this worth reading as a usefully thought-provoking contribution towards a theology of healing, despite not being persuaded by some of the conclusions.

 Reviewed by Mike Rattenbury, 17th June 2020