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## Can Postmodernism Serve Faith?

As *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith* was nearing publication, InterVarsity Press editor Gary Deddo took the opportunity to interview author and professor of English and film Crystal Downing about how this unique book came about and why she approached her subject in such a distinctive, engaging and, well, postmodern fashion.



Crystal L. Downing

**Deddo:** Crystal, your book *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith* is just about to come out. That book has a little more autobiography in it than most books of its kind. Tell us a little about what motivated you to write this book.

**Downing:** Many intelligent engagements with and/or

analyses of postmodernism have been published by Christians. However, as far as I can tell, all of them have been written in the form of traditional modernist scholarship. My book seems to be the first to employ a style more consonant with postmodernism itself. Because postmodernism addresses the "situatedness" of a person, in contradistinction to the modernist privileging of an objective reason that can transcend the positionality of the body, I discuss my own "situatedness," using stories from my life to reflect not only

my relationship with Christ but also my understanding of postmodernism. This leads to the primary postmodern element in my style: the juxtaposition of the personal with the theoretical, the humorously whimsical with the seriously analytical. The great Marxist critic of postmodernism, Fredric Jameson, called such juxtapositioning "pastiche." Readers of my book will definitely get a sense that my book is a pastiche of the light and the heavy, the silly and the serious. But rather than being gratuitous, my funny and/or personal stories operate as illustrations or parables for the more heavy theoretical content, making difficult ideas more accessible. That, at least, was my goal in writing the book.

**Deddo:** We are coming to realize that postmodern-

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## Separating Myth from Reality in the Life of John Wyclif

With the forthcoming publication of *John Wyclif: Myth & Reality* by Gillian R. Evans, InterVarsity Press makes its initial academic foray into the genre of biography. This is an area in which we hope to publish more, and we can't imagine anyone better suited to help us get started than Gill Evans.



G. R. Evans

Gill is Professor of Medieval Theology and Intellectual History at the University of Cambridge and was British Academy Research Reader in Theology from 1986 to 1988. She is a prodigious scholar and has written extensively in the areas of ecumenical theology, church history and

intellectual history, including a number of intellectual biographies of ancient and medieval authors such as Augustine, Gregory the Great, Anselm and Bernard of Clairvaux. Her recent books include *A Brief History of Heresy* (Blackwell), *Fifty Key Medieval Thinkers* (Routledge) and *Faith in the Medieval World* (Lion Hudson/InterVarsity Press).

We're delighted to have a scholar of Gill's stature writing our initial biographic volume on such a pivotal historical figure as John Wyclif. We think this

makes for an unbeatable combination and hope that you'll think so too!

IVP Academic associate editor Joel Scandrett recently had the opportunity to interview Professor Evans about her forthcoming book.

**Scandrett:** Gill, perhaps you can begin by telling our readers what prompted you to write this particular biography. What is it about John Wyclif that intrigues you?

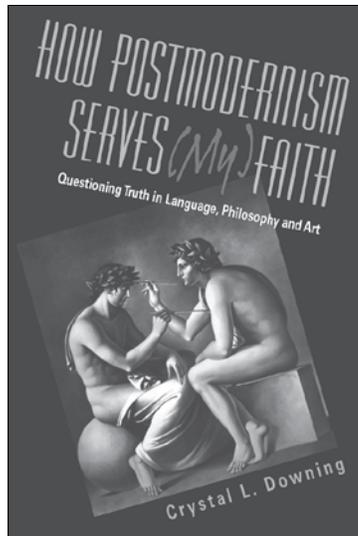
**Evans:** I was asked by the U.K. publisher Lion to suggest a subject for a biography. They were keen to try to develop a new kind of book for their list that would be a solid contribution to knowledge about its subject but would also make sense to the general reader who might not have much specialist knowl-

*continued on page 3*

### Postmodernism, continued from page 1

ism is not easy to define. But perhaps you could tell us what part of the story often gets left out as we attempt to understand what's going on in that realm of our Western intellectual culture.

**Downing:** Among all the brilliant Christian books on postmodernism, none has grappled with the arts (other than illustrative references to film and TV). This is a bit ironic, since the word *postmodernism* began in the art world! My



book, therefore, is the first Christian reflection (as far as I know) on how developments in the arts—especially painting, architecture and literature—reflect and affect the fundamental philosophical and theological questions that mark the transition from modernism to postmodernism.

**Deddo:** You've been teaching college students for some years now and have been interacting with them about postmodern themes, especially in literature and film. Would you say that today's students really think as postmodernists do? Have you seen a certain shift over the years?

**Downing:** Just as there are many different kinds of Christianity, there are many different kinds of postmodernism. And some kinds have been assimilated by students more readily than others. Students can't help reflecting postmodernism since, according to many theorists, the Internet is its preeminent symbol: the ultimate equalizer, since anyone can publish his or her ideas and get read with no jury to assess their accuracy. And much of postmodernism, especially in the arts, was about breaking down the elitist distinction between High Culture and the culture of the masses—a culture that High Modernists regarded as similar to the culture growing on food left in the back of the refrig-

erator. Such equalizing has both positive and negative consequences. Unfortunately, many students, like culture at large, have assimilated what I call "the worst of postmodernism": the commodification of identity. In other words, people define themselves by the commodities they purchase. Both the Internet and consumer goods reflect an emphasis on surfaces that marks one form of postmodernism.

conference this year, sponsored by an organization that helped make literary postmodernism famous, was called "God Is Undead"! Postmodernism gives intelligent Christians an opportunity to share their faith in the academy; my book, in fact, gives a dramatic example from my own life.

**Deddo:** Other than reading your book, of course, what would you recommend to our readers for seeing into and grasping the best of postmodern-

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But students today also reflect the best of postmodernism: a willingness to be open to the perspectives of "the other." What they often haven't thought through, however, is how to vigorously stand for one's own beliefs while still respecting "the other." This is what my book addresses, showing how the most sophisticated postmodern thinkers do *not* say "Everything is relative," or "Tolerance is the greatest good." Unfortunately, many assume that's what postmodernism says and, even worse, agree with it!

**Deddo:** Crystal, as you look out, what do you think is at stake in the church's getting a better grip on postmodern thinking and sensibilities? Is it a big deal? Some say that it's mostly over. Is it?

**Downing:** Many people who say that philosophic postmodernism is over never liked it in the first place. These people, usually committed to Marxism or scientism, are especially disdainful because postmodernism is now known as "the religious turn" or "postsecularism." As modernists they believe that humanity must progress beyond the need for religion, and since postmodernism turns us back to religion they are horrified. Villanova University continues to sponsor conferences on postmodernism and religion, believing it to be alive and well. Its next conference is "Religion and Postmodernism: Athens and Jerusalem on the Polis" (Oct. 26-28, 2006). The "religious turn" is precisely why Christians need to take postmodernism seriously: it has created an openness to religious vocabularies that has dramatically affected academia. One "secular"

ism? In particular what films or literature would you put on the top of your list? Any works of art or exhibits?

**Downing:** For visual art, I would read *A Broken Beauty*, edited by Theodore Prescott (Eerdmans, 2005). It discusses how postmodernism has returned art to an interest in the human body and the significance that has for Christians. For films, I suggest the following, along with the essays I have published (mostly for *Books & Culture*) that explain how they illustrate postmodernism:

**War of the Worlds:** "Rime of the Ancient Martian," *Books & Culture* 11 (Sept./Oct. 2005): 45.

**Chicken Run and X-Men:** "Yolking with Postmodernism," lead article for the *Books & Culture* website (Oct. 2000 to Oct. 2001).

**Any Given Sunday:** "Playing the Postmodern Field," *Books & Culture* 6 (May/June 2000): 9-10.

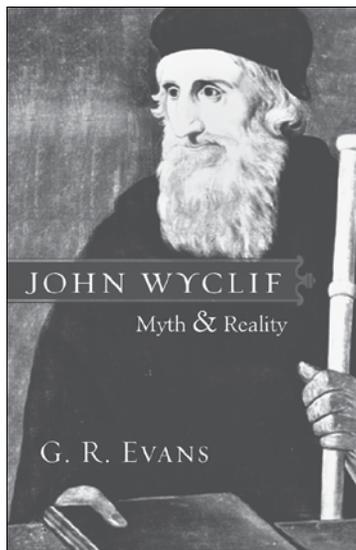
**Waking Ned Devine:** "Richard Rorty for the Silver Screen: *Waking Ned Devine* as Apologetic for Postmodernism," *Books & Culture* 5 (Sept./Oct. 1999): 8-10.

**Crimes and Misdemeanors:** "Woody Allen's *Blindness and Insight: The Palimpsests of Crimes and Misdemeanors*," *Religion and the Arts* 1 (1997): 73-92.

**The Moderns:** "Pos(t)ing Modernism: The Postmodernism of *The Moderns*," *Pacific Coast Philology* 29 (Sept. 1994): 109-18. ■

*John Wyclif, continued from page 1*

edge. That's the most difficult kind of book to write of course—quite a challenge. I spent a good deal of time thinking about possibilities. Most of my work in the past has been on the key figures of early Christianity in the West and the earlier Middle Ages. But I've also written on ecumenical dialogue and on the history of universities. I wanted to find someone who was interesting for what he thought and said more than for what he did, and whose reputation was important in itself in the history of Christianity. I tried out various



possible subjects and then suddenly Wyclif was standing there, the obvious choice.

Wyclif was not a man I felt I “knew” as a person, and the process of getting to know him was unusually interesting. First there was the need to get behind the myths. There an ecumenical training comes in very useful. You learn to be open-minded to the possibility that there have been misunderstandings. And any theologian is going to be interested in a writer whose struggles to understand the truth are so painful and frank. In that way, Wyclif is a bit like Augustine. But for the modern theologian who teaches in a university there is the extra interest of seeing how the realities of academic life affect the theological “project,” shaping it with tough criticism and the chance to try out ideas in debate. Wyclif enjoyed all that, though he sometimes found it rather bruising.

**Scandrett:** The subtitle of this book is *Myth & Reality*. What are some of the myths about Wyclif that you deal with in the course of the book?

**Evans:** Wyclif was turned into a hero (or a villain) in the adversarial polemic of the sixteenth-century Reformation. Those who made him out

to be the “Morning Star” of the Reformation really did him no service, because they overstated what a single individual of his generation could do. It is like the modern adulation of celebrities: you lose sight of the real person, and it becomes difficult to make a fair estimate of his or her real achievement. That was what I was interested in, because here we have someone who has been credited with an enormous achievement which really wasn't his, or certainly not entirely his.

Wyclif was part of a trend. He did not

and produced an edition from which we can begin to see what was agitating would-be reformers and popular preachers in the generation or two after Wyclif. That pushes Wyclif into the background of those events, where I think he really belongs. He made a lot of noise of course, and drew the fire of the authorities. He was “demonized.” Everything the authorities disapproved of tended to be blamed on him. But that created a fog of misleading assumptions which modern scholarship has gradually been penetrating.

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start a movement on purpose. There had been “dissidents” in Europe for a couple of centuries, followers of Waldes of Lyons and others, who were challenging the authority of the institutional church and reading the Bible for themselves. There were “popular” preachers in Wyclif's lifetime in England who were encouraging that kind of thinking. Wyclif was really an academic at heart, not a popular demagogue. Once he became well known for his controversial opinions on some fairly technical theological questions, and especially once he got into trouble with the ecclesiastical and government authorities, the “popular” movement that was going on anyway borrowed his name and his reputation. And we don't know how much he was involved in the English Bible project, but he was certainly not its main instigator, let alone the chief translator.

**Scandrett:** This is the first major biography to be written on Wyclif in nearly a century. What new light has been shed on Wyclif and his context in the intervening period?

**Evans:** The main thing has been the move away from treating Wyclif as a hero. Once it became possible to take a hard look at the evidence without trying to make it tell a particular story, it was obvious that the contribution Wyclif actually made to the trends which were going to lead to the Reformation was very nuanced and hard to pin down. Anne Hudson's work on the “Wycliffite” sermons has been particularly important. She has worked with the manuscripts

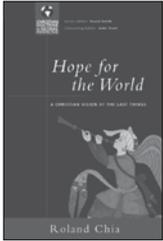
I ought to emphasize how much my book is indebted to this pioneering twentieth-century work. All I can claim to have brought to it is an interpretation of the facts as we can now begin to see them—and a bit of specialist knowledge of the world of medieval universities perhaps, and especially of the way they did theology there.

**Scandrett:** Fourteenth-century Oxford was a very different world from twenty-first-century England, not to mention the U.S. What are some features of life in this period that will surprise our readers, either in regard to their strangeness or their familiarity?

**Evans:** In one way it would seem very familiar. The U.S. has a strong focus on the local community from which people look out and try to make sense of the world. The fourteenth century was a bit like that, and especially for the students and scholars of Oxford. Then, as now, the academic world was really international, and new books were read all over Europe. And they got just the same tough reviews as they do today!

For those who know modern Oxford well the continuities of tradition are very striking. They had the essence of the university there already in Wyclif's day. There's something about the excitement of debate and the way topics become controversial for a time and everyone is lecturing on them, which is still part of the flavor of life in modern Oxford. It's partly because it is still run as an academic democracy where the dons can challenge the management. You may

## New & Noteworthy

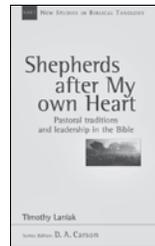


Writing from Southeast Asia—"the 'second front' in the war against terrorism"—Roland Chia argues in *Hope for the World* that "hope . . . always emerges from a specific historical and cultural context." Israel's context shaped its anticipation of the Day of the Lord; Christ gives context to our hope for eternal life under a sovereign God; and the resurrection carries the church—and with it the hope of the world—through the valley of the shadow of death.

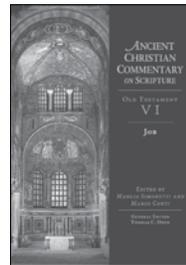


Jim Sire's new book, *Why Good Arguments Often Fail*, takes a close look at the frustrations of many earnest apologists. Why do our best arguments often fall flat? Well, sometimes our arguments simply aren't that good. How can we make them better? At other times our approach or demeanor inhibits the message. How can we improve our engagement with our audience? Drawing on wisdom borne of years of formal and informal experience, Sire helps readers learn to frame better, more persuasive arguments for the Christian faith. Students will find Sire's wit and

wisdom thoroughly engaging. The book concludes with an annotated bibliography of further resources.



*Shepherds After My Own Heart* by Timothy Laniak explores the theme of the shepherd/pastor through the whole of Scripture. It entails a study of ancient Near Eastern understandings of the shepherd metaphor: its uses and development in the Old Testament and its employment by the apostolic writers to describe the significance of Jesus Christ in his earthly ministry and ascended lordship. In doing so, it articulates key elements of a biblical theology of pastoral ministry and leadership.



Manlio Simonetti (a leading expert in patristic exegesis from the Augustinian Patristic Institute and the University of Rome) and Marco Conti (Ph.D., Leeds, and a research fellow at the Augustinian Patristic Institute) have assembled a vibrant collection of excerpts on Job, the drama of a righteous man struggling to make sense of the evil that has befallen him without

cause. Interest in Job was not strong in the first Christian generations; not until Origen do we find evidence of a systematic treatment of the whole work, known to us only through the testimony of Jerome to a translation from Hilary of Poitiers. The first flurry of more intense interest awaited the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth.

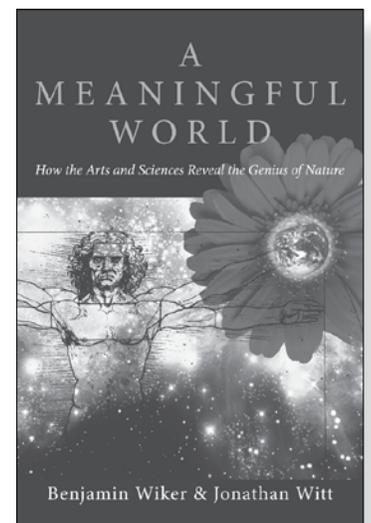
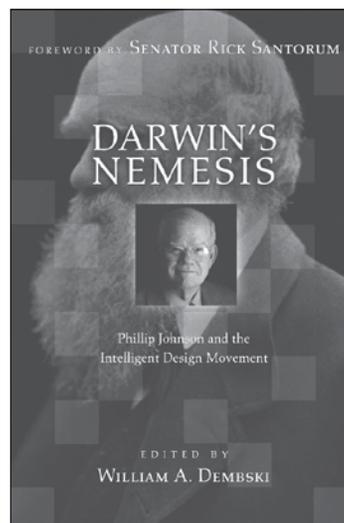
This new ACCS volume draws on Greek texts from Origen, Didymus the Blind, Julian the Arian, John Chrysostom, Hesychius of Jerusalem and Olympiodorus. Latin writers range from Julian of Eclanum and Philip the Priest to Gregory the Great, while Syriac writers include Ephrem the Syrian and Isho'dad of Merv.



In *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture* Walt Mueller digs deep into his own philosophical and theological training, and into the cultural world of today's teenagers. Taking cues from Paul's walk through Athens, Walt explores how young people see the world and communicate their needs and expectations. When young people are seen and heard, they can be met with the God who fulfills their longing. For classroom use in youth ministry and theology of culture studies. ■

## Meaningful Design: Phillip Johnson and the Genius of Nature

Two books in our current list touch on subjects related to the intelligent design discussion in new and invigorating ways. *Darwin's Nemesis* presents a solid collection of essays by scientists, philosophers, theologians and apologists presented to Phillip Johnson in his honor. This festschrift, including essays by two of his critics, provides insight into the man, the movement and Phil's leadership of it, and continuing issues facing ID. It makes a significant contribution to the current discussion and reveals the personal dimension of this remarkable and controversial movement. From a new but complementary angle Ben Wiker and Jonathan Witt attempt to expand the discussion of signs of intelligence beyond the mere biological. Exploring literature, geometry, the history of science, physics, chemistry and cosmology, they make the case for a meaningful world displayed in the genius of the arts and sciences. This wide-ranging and fascinating book will make the heart of any liberal arts student or teacher glad. ■



**John Wyclif, continued from page 3**

have read something in the press about some pretty exciting events there at present. Wyclif would have loved it. He would have been writing fierce articles for the *Oxford Magazine* and letters to *The Times*, and his students would have rushed to his lectures to hear how outrageous he was going to be that day. There's as much politics as theology in his story.

**Scandrett:** Finally, biography is not a genre in which InterVarsity Press has published much before. However, you've published a considerable number of biographies in the course of your career. What is it about this genre that you find so compelling? What would you say to commend it to our readers?

**Evans:** I've been drawn to the way individuals who have made a mark on history, particularly Christian history, have thought things through. Conventional history traditionally concentrates on political events and social and economic trends, but that only shows you the outside. Some people in every generation were writers, and that's where you get a glimpse of what they wanted to challenge in what everyone took for granted, and why. So it is "intellectual biography" that I've tried to write here, and in the other books I've

done about such individuals. I'm really pleased that a great Christian publisher is opening up in this direction, because I think it is a good way for people to understand what the faith has meant in different generations.

causing a dangerous escalation of tensions. And within the Christian church itself there are several topics which are being seen as church-dividing in a quite disproportionate way. Wyclif is a particularly good example of what happens when someone

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## It is important . . . to try to understand how the perennial questions of Christian theology and the interpretation of Scripture interact with the way people are thinking about other things.

It is important to look at both the inside and the outside of what happens in history, and to try to understand how the perennial questions of Christian theology and the interpretation of Scripture interact with the way people are thinking about other things. We can see why it is so important in the world at present. Mutual misunderstanding about the faith of other faith communities and ignorance of the way other societies see things and how they set their priorities is

is "demonized" or "lionized" and then "used" by opposing sides in ways which do not have much to do with the writer's original concerns or what he was actually saying. So I suppose I see this kind of study as a small contribution to encouraging open-mindedness and clarity about matters which have become destructively controversial and adversarial. It's an ecumenical approach. But it's also about the pursuit of truth. ■

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## Introducing Veritas Forum Books



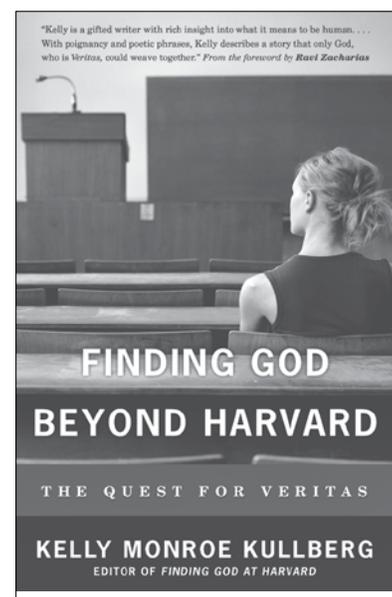
In the early 1990s, a group of Christians at Harvard wondered what would happen if their university was challenged to consider the meaning of their school motto, "Veritas." Their efforts became known as The Veritas Forum, in which top Christian scholars from across academic disciplines gathered to investigate the plausibility of the Christian worldview in the university environment. Since then, Veritas Forums have been held at dozens of colleges and universities across the country, involving almost a quarter-million students and faculty.

Now InterVarsity Press is pleased to announce a publishing partnership with The Veritas Forum, known as Veritas Forum Books. The purpose of Veritas Forum Books is to connect the pursuit of knowledge with the deepest questions of life and truth. Authors will include established and emerging Christian thinkers who will grapple with challenging issues and offer

academically rigorous and responsible scholarship that contributes to current and ongoing discussions in the university world.

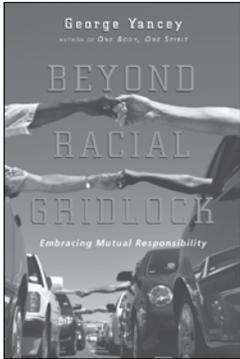
The first book in this new partnership is *Finding God Beyond Harvard: The Quest for Veritas* by Veritas Forum founder Kelly Monroe Kullberg, editor of *Finding God at Harvard*. In her new book, Kelly tells her story and the story of The Veritas Forum as it spreads across the country, providing a narrative apologetic as she invites readers to join her in the search for truth. As a result, readers discover that ultimately, Veritas is a Person, embodied in Jesus of Nazareth.

*Finding God Beyond Harvard* is an intellectual road trip and a creative model of doing apologetics in today's postmodern context. As Mark Noll says, "Kelly Monroe Kullberg's memoir-cum-institutional history offers a most stimulating introduction to The Veritas Forum. . . . The focus on Jesus Christ as the Truth has also been the focus of her own peripatetic, energetic and thought-provoking life."



To learn more about Veritas Forum Books, visit [veritas.ivpress.com](http://veritas.ivpress.com). For more information about The Veritas Forum, visit [veritas.org](http://veritas.org). ■

## Understanding Cultural Dynamics Both Locally and Globally

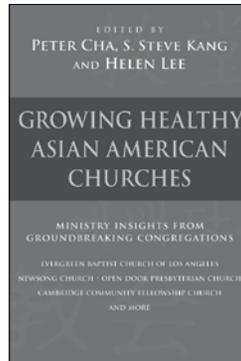


InterVarsity Press has long championed books about multiethnic and crosscultural issues. In addition to the previously announced *Subverting the Power of Prejudice* by Sandra Barnes, this season brings several key titles that should serve as helpful resources in racial and ethnic discussions.

*Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility*

comes from sociologist George Yancey, who collaborated with researcher Michael Emerson and others on the landmark study of multiracial churches, *United by Faith*. Yancey points out a variety of approaches to racial issues that Christians have used (colorblindness, Anglo-conformity, multiculturalism and white responsibility), each of which has its own strengths and limitations. The problem with all of them is that they are largely secular models that have been imported and adopted without much distinct Christian reflection. Yancey argues for an alternative model, mutual responsibility, that acknowledges that different racial groups contribute different but mutually supportive aspects to the question of racial justice.

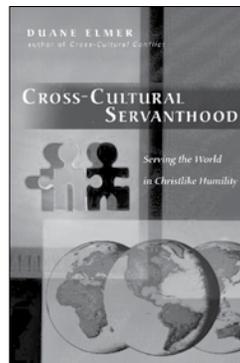
In recent years Asian Americans have seen significant demographic growth, and this is reflected in the growing enrollment of Asian American seminarians. Yet little has been written to assist Asian Americans in pastoral work. Filling the gap is *Growing Healthy Asian American Churches*, edited by Peter Cha, Steve Kang and Helen Lee. The editors bring together contributions from leading Asian American pastors and church leaders, offering key insights, practices and examples for helping Asian American churches handle such issues as intergenerational conflict and leadership development. Sang Hyun Lee of Princeton Theological Seminary



lauds, "This is the first comprehensive book about Asian American churches written by the leaders of those churches themselves. The essays in this volume are theologically sound and well informed, thoroughly based on the Scripture, and refreshingly honest."

Duane Elmer is

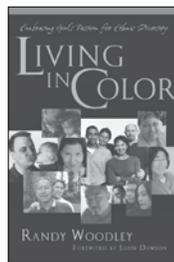
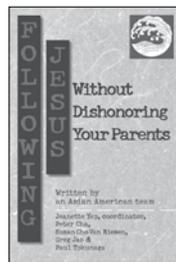
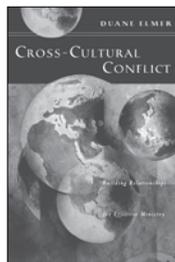
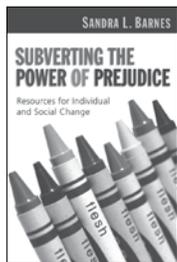
already well known in missiological circles as the author of *Cross-Cultural Conflict* and *Cross-Cultural Connections*. He completes his trilogy with his new book, *Cross-Cultural Servanthood*. Here he shows how Westerners



often inadvertently communicate arrogance, superiority and paternalism when serving in cross-cultural contexts. Elmer helps students planning for short-term or long-term international work to know how to serve in ways that are received well by host cultures. Wheaton's Scott Moreau commends,

"Simply put, this marvelous book opens significant doors to more effective cross-cultural service. If all missionaries lived out the lessons Elmer presents, the effect on missionary service and outreach—not to mention the church—would be incalculable." ■

## More Multiethnic and Crosscultural Titles



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