

## CHRISTIAN CULTURE

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**THE SCIENCE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN: Thinking Bigger About Loving Our Neighbors** by Dr. Emily Smith. Zondervan Books, 2023. 288 pages. Paperback; \$19.99. ISBN: 9780310366690.

“Who was the neighbor?” This is the question that Jesus asks in the tenth chapter of the book of Luke, and the question that prompted Emily Smith’s book *The Science of the Good Samaritan*. She sets out to show her readers that neighboring is about shifting our thinking and worldview. To achieve this task, Smith wields her wealth of education and experience. Having earned a Master of Science in public health from the University of South Carolina and a PhD in epidemiology from the Gillings School of Global Public Health at UNC Chapel Hill, she is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Emergency Medicine/Surgery at Duke University and at Duke Global Health Institute. She is a mother, a pastor’s wife, and the creator of the popular Facebook page “Friendly Neighbor Epidemiologist.” Throughout her book, Smith weaves together her Christian faith and her vocation. To her, “epidemiology is the story of the Good Samaritan!” (p. 28); “the sacred work of telling people’s stories through calculus and weighted metrics and integrals” (p. 145).

The book is divided into three parts: centering, cost, and courage—the themes in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). The first part is about changing our mindsets and challenging our worldviews through centering. The second part is about the cost of doing so; the third is about the courage needed to live as neighbors and to show our faith through deeds. Each part has chapters that begin with quotes from scripture and/or inspirational scholars. The book concludes with acknowledgments and an appendix that contains practical tips, a reading list, and bibliographic notes.

In Part 1, Smith describes centering as the act of showing attention and focusing. The things we center are the things that compel us. She argues that, as Christians, we must center our neighbors: “The Good Samaritan story shows us that centering on our neighbors requires us to shift our attention and focus toward our neighbors” (p. 11). In doing so, we see many inequities. We see the hard truths of discrimination, structural violence, marginalization, and privilege. If these concepts put you on the defensive, I suggest focusing on chapter 5, in which Smith dismantles common arguments with grace and wisdom. She tells how her grandparents earned everything through hard work and perseverance. They didn’t have wealth. But they did have white privilege. Smith acknowledges her own family’s efforts and hard work, while also acknowledging the system that worked for them and not against them. Her grandparents could own land and farm at a time when

others were unable to do so simply because of the color of their skin.

In nearly every chapter, Smith shares examples from around the world: New Mexico, Texas, Honduras, Somaliland, Burundi, India, and more. Readers learn of events such as the Great Scramble, consider the importance of statues such as the Mothers of Gynecology Monument, hear stories from United Nations meetings, and evaluate the importance of access to healthcare. The reader will have both their worldview and their knowledge of geography challenged.

Part 2, surprisingly only two chapters, focuses on the cost of living as a neighbor. Perhaps naively I thought that this section would discuss the financial cost of helping our neighbors. Certainly, food and medical supplies cost money. But instead, in thirteen concise pages, Smith focuses on the costs to our relationships and our health. I found the stories shared in these pages to be particularly heartbreaking. Not to say that the stories of racism in the United States and poverty in Somaliland were not heartbreaking; they definitely were. But the stories of Christians threatening Smith and her family were particularly distressing. She writes that “more than 90 percent of the threats” that she received were from Christians (p. 119). This is an unexpected cost. Throughout the pandemic, Smith has shared her love and epidemiological expertise to help people around the world understand what was happening through her Friendly Neighbor Epidemiologist page on Facebook. Then members of her own community and church family attacked her for it; she even received hand-written threats in her family’s mailbox. She recalls a message written in red and black marker that used both biblical revelation language and also language she couldn’t repeat. She and her family had to move for their own safety.

Part 3 focuses on the courage to relearn, dismantle our unconscious biases, and live as neighbors. It includes a challenging chapter entitled “Topics Too Many Evangelicals Don’t Want to Talk About” (p. 169). This explored several contentious topics such as socialism, capitalism, equity, climate change, and more. She reminds readers that God cares about our faith, and also about how we spend our money and care for our planet. Smith argues that we shouldn’t be scared of taboo words. Instead, we should “hold the words up to the cross and see if they reflect heaven” (p. 180). Another equally challenging chapter was entitled “How Do We Measure the Worth of a Life?” (p. 190). Smith tells the story of two doctors: Sheik Humarr Khan, who was Sierra Leone’s top Ebola physician, and an unnamed American doctor. Both contracted Ebola while working in Africa. At the time, there was an experimental drug available, but only enough for one person. Although it was stored in the health facility where Humarr Khan was, he didn’t receive it. Instead, it was shipped to

the American doctor in Liberia. This doctor lived and the African doctor died. Smith explains that part of “being courageous is coming to terms with the fact that these inequities happen all the time” (p. 199).

While much of the content was inspiring, I also found some disappointments. For example, Smith’s suggestion to “have courage to be fully you” (p. 141) made me hesitate. Statements like this may lead people to be more complacent than courageous. Yes, we shouldn’t try to be someone else. We should use our unique giftings to love God and love our neighbors. But shouldn’t we always strive to be better? To be like Jesus?

Strengths of the book include the detailed stories and science, with moving anecdotes alongside convincing data. All of these are equally inspiring and thought provoking. Emily Smith is clearly a skilled storyteller and scientist. Thus, this book is a successful display of science communication. It integrates science and faith seamlessly. For example, she frequently repeats a phrase attributed to Saint Dominic: “your desk is your prayer bench” (p. 69). Science and faith are not separate; for Smith, her epidemiological desk work is how she communes with God and expresses her faith. Overall, this book should satisfy a variety of readers.

I recommend this book for anyone curious about the field of epidemiology, or curious about how knowledge of public health and poverty can help Christians be good neighbors. While this book may not be a suitable text for a university-level course, since it is neither a “faith book” nor a “science book” (p. 3), it does serve as a helpful example of science as vocation and of science and faith integration. For those with a theology background, it helps to show that science can be embraced. For those with a science background, it can show that faith can turn work into a calling.

Throughout the book, Smith introduces the reader to many people: Dr. Edna Adan Ismail (p. 15), Frederick Douglass (p. 44), Dr. Paul Farmer (p. 77), Father Gustavo Gutiérrez (p. 80), Dr. Kathryn Hayhoe (p. 172), and many more. So, who was the neighbor? Clearly, these people were. They courageously centered their lives around their neighbors. May we learn from their examples, and from the expert stories and science shared by Emily Smith.

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## ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE

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**CREATION CARE DISCIPLESHIP: Why Earthkeeping Is an Essential Christian Practice** by Steven Bouma-Prediger. Baker Academic, 2023. 213 pages. Paperback; \$25.99. ISBN: 9781540966322.

Steven Bouma-Prediger is a religion scholar at Hope College, Michigan, and a well-known theologian who has written about the need for Christians to care for the environment. In his latest book, Bouma-Prediger summarizes the main arguments for earthkeeping and illustrates them with personal testimonies, which make for a delightful and convincing read. He utilizes a pastoral tone that does not water down the scientific content while backing up his arguments with abundant footnotes and Christian meditations from scripture at the end of each chapter. The author presents earthkeeping as a practice solidly rooted in the Bible, Christian theology, and tradition, that is demonstrated in several Christian communities. In short, he maintains that “care for the earth and its flourishing is part and parcel of what it means to be a Christian” (p. 3).

Earthkeeping is a concept related to creation care that, in Bouma-Prediger’s mind, is better than stewardship. Stewardship in English “churchy” jargon often minimizes the inherent value of the environment, seeing nature as a collection of resources to be exploited. By using the word earthkeeping, the author emphasizes the meaning of Genesis 2:15: “to take care of the garden.”

After clarifying why we should read his book in the first chapter, Bouma-Prediger walks us through selected scriptural passages about nature in the second chapter. We realize the strong connection between us and the other creatures and God’s provision to all the created order. He also emphasizes the need to revise our view of the end times. If Christians see the future as living in an immaterial heaven, the earth is not worth saving. With a proper reading of scripture, we understand that God loves his creation, and he expects us to care for it.

The third chapter delves into theological aspects of earthkeeping, in which the author dismantles an accusation that it implies pantheism. Christian theology removed gods from nature but did not remove nature’s sacredness. No creatures are gods, but they still have value to God. The pillage of nature cannot be justified. A biblical meditation from the book of Job centers on the use of Leviathan and Behemoth to understand ecological hospitality. The lengthy descriptions of these creatures (assumed by the author to be the crocodile and the hippopotamus) are a reminder that “we humans are not at the center of things” (p. 82). God cares for these creatures even though they are not designed for our specific use.

Chapter 4 borrows relevant teachings about nature conservation from different theologians influential in the history of the Christian church. He quotes Pope Francis, Patriarch Bartholomew I, H. Paul Santmire, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Randy Woodley. Their views represent diverse theological positions: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, Ecofeminism, and Native American Christian, respectively. The chapter ends with excerpts from the “Joint Message for the Protection of Creation,”