

## ***Encountering Ecclesiastes: A Book for our Time***

By J Limburg<sup>1</sup>

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The book of Ecclesiastes has spoken to the imagination of preachers, teachers and pop-stars alike and, within very different historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts has proven itself a relevant and useful text. The purpose of this publication by Limburg is exemplified by its sub-title, i.e. the appropriation of the book of Ecclesiastes within present day faith communities. It is not intended as an exhaustive commentary, but rather a sincere attempt, drawing from personal and academic experiences, to engage with the message of the Preacher and to determine its significance for contemporary society. While Limburg writes from within a North American context, the themes he addresses and responses that he offers have a wider significance. After all, the global nature of the question “what is it all about” is unmistakable, even though responses to this question will be more context specific.

From within his own context Limburg argues for the continued relevance of Ecclesiastes for contemporary society, seeing that it poses a challenge to both hardcore believers and, especially, those whose faith lingers on the fringes. In demonstrating this, Limburg applies a thematic approach to the book of Ecclesiastes. In chapter 1 and 8 the “meaning of it all” is brought into focus. While chapter 1 sets the stage for his following argument, chapter 8 reflects on the value of Ecclesiastes’ response questions raised in the preceding chapters. These include the question concerning the limited nature of “being” (chapter 2, focussing on Eccl 1-2), the possibility and value of “knowing” (chapter 3, focussing on Eccl 3), the value of hard work (chapter 4, focussing on Eccl 4), the nature of God (chapter 5, focussing on Eccl 5), figuring death (chapter 6, focussing on Eccl 6 & 7), and living life (chapter 7, focussing on Eccl 9, 11 & 12:1-8).

While Limburg offers a well informed perspective on Ecclesiastes’ meanderings, he does at times pass over difficult issues too quickly. This is comprehensible in terms of the books intent, but as a result the reader desiring more knowledge on some of Ecclesiastes’ theological peculiarities will have to look elsewhere. One such an example pertains to the theme of death and life after death. It is rather surprising that Limburg turns to the wider context of the Jewish and Christian canon to address this theme when Ecclesiastes’ view on death and life after death, in his view, proves itself “inadequate”. Fact is, on this point Ecclesiastes’ message is ambiguous and controversial, but should be allowed be so, rather than to tame the preacher’s voice by putting it into “context”. On the other hand Limburg rightly refers to the refreshing honesty in Ecclesiastes’ tendency toward agnosticism (134).

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I.e. that acknowledging that sometimes “we simply do not know” can be a liberating experience. Limburg also highlights Ecclesiastes’ well known double theme of *carpe diem* and *memento mori*. Since Christianity has often been characterised as a religion of waiting – in the process allowing life to pass one by – Ecclesiastes entices its readers to stop waiting and to start living, amidst life’s uncertainties.

In view of the vastness of Ecclesiastes’ theological scope, this publication of Limburg might seem rather brief at times. Yet, it does offer insight into Ecclesiastes’ thought world, and how it has penetrated the thoughts of others, shaping rhetoric and impacting on lives, and continues to do so in the present. Limburg demonstrates Ecclesiastes’ potential contribution for all grappling with life, faith and God, and is gladly recommended.