Book Review *– Kimberly Sawers*

Living with Purpose in a Polarizing World:
Guidance from Biblical Narratives

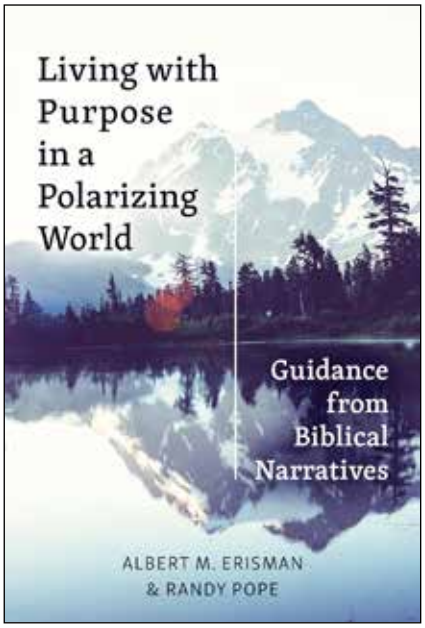
By Albert M. Erisman and Randy Pope

Hendrickson Publishers, Theology of Work Project, 2024, 232 pp, USD 24.95/GBP 20.96, ISBN 978-496-8715-5

When I first heard the title of this book, I was immediately drawn to it. It is hard to get through a day without hearing about some polarizing issue[1], where individuals on either side of the debate can't even speak civilly about the other side. While I imagine that many geographic areas experience this polarization, it feels like it is being taken to a whole new level for those of us living in the US. So, I immediately went out and bought the book.

My initial assumption was that the book would give guidance on the polarizing world in general, but the authors direct the book specifically to Christians living out their faith in an increasing secular world or a post-Christian world. Further, they illustrate how Christians might apply these principles within a business context. The introduction starts out by warning us about responding as victims of our current circumstances, reminding the reader that there is both good and bad in our Christian history, that Christians have it much worse in many places in the world, and that we should acknowledge God's sovereignty in placing us in this moment in time. Further, they describe five ways Christians respond in this current seemingly anti-Christian world (resignation and assimilation, withdrawal and retrenchment, fear, seeking power and anger). They then encourage Christians to consider another way of responding by "dedicating our lives to seeking the world's good and cooperating with God in the work of redemption and restoration that he is doing" based on Jeremiah 29:7 and Micah 6:7-8.[2]

Each chapter of the book examines a biblical character as an illustration of how that character manoeuvred in a world that had many of the elements that we might identify with today. Many of them were exiles or were



living in a foreign hostile land like Joseph, Moses, Esther, or Daniel. Some of them illustrate topics that divide us today like immigration policies, women in society, and relationships across ethnic backgrounds like Ruth. Some of them had to deal with the issue of misuse of power like David. And some of them had to deal with divisive issues within the church like Peter and Paul.

While each chapter has great insight, I will touch on just a few that resonated with me as they relate to this year's Faith in Business theme of Power and Influence. The first is the story of Joseph and all the ups and downs (e.g. being sold into slavery, imprisoned) he encountered on his road to become second only to Pharaoh in charge of the whole of Egypt. He could very well have become a bitter angry person, yet he responds to the request of Pharaoh to interpret his dreams with respect and then actively works to seek good for Egypt and her people. Joseph could have fully assimilated into the Egyptian culture, forgetting his calling (dreams from his youth) as well as succumbing to the trappings of the power he was given. But we see that he doesn't, and the authors suggest that there may be several things that influenced him. First his relationship with someone much greater than himself, second his relationship with others who didn't know his greatness, and finally the importance of the project he was called to do (saving food for times of famine). The story of Joseph gives us insight into how to respond to those who act destructively against us (i.e., forgiveness toward his brothers) and the realisation of the important work we are called to do. The authors ended this chapter with a reminder that biblical narratives help us examine the choices and lives of imperfect people. The choices Joseph made, while prudent at the time, led to other issues for the people of Israel.

Two other illustrations of power and influence come from Moses and David. By all accounts Moses was very meek – more than all the people who were on the face of the earth (Numbers 12:3). According to the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, meekness can be regarded as strength under control. Moses was called by God to deliver his people out of Egypt, and it is interesting to note that the call came while Moses

was at work. Throughout the story of Moses, we see him leading the people as well as constantly interceding on their behalf, even when they continue to behave in self-destructive ways. How might we use power (strength under control) to intercede on behalf of others?

While Moses was meek, David has not been described in that way. Yet, the authors suggest that if humility is defined as understanding, accepting, and playing the role one is assigned, then David could be described as humble. David exhibited humility in at least two ways. First, he was anointed as the next king while Saul was still king and remained king for some time. David did not try to usurp Saul's authority but instead entered his service as a musician and then as a challenger to Goliath, treating Saul with the respect due to his position. We see a man after God's own heart who is also seriously flawed. Once David became king, he acted as if the rules didn't apply to him by taking Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, and ultimately causing Uriah's death. When Nathan confronted him about his sin, David immediately confesses that he has sinned against God and repents. Thus, the second illustration of humility is his willingness to accept responsibility as well as recognise that God was the true king of Israel. How might we humbly follow our calling, treat others with respect, as well as guard against the trappings of power?

The last example that caught my eye was the story of Daniel. Here was a person taken from his homeland to Babylon, the conquering nation, to serve in Nebuchadnezzar's government. He had no power and in that capacity was asked to eat food that violated his religious beliefs. Instead of a complete refusal to comply, he suggested an alternative pathway. A test to see if a diet that met with his beliefs would also meet the intended goals of good physical health. It turns out that it did. So many times, we feel we do not have any real power, but Daniel is an example of a person who could have influence even without power. How might we live and perhaps even lead in situations where we feel we have no power?

On a personal level, I was also drawn to the chapters on Peter, Paul, and Jesus which spoke more directly to the discord between people of faith. My thinking is twofold. First, there seems to be a rise of Christians in the political sphere, for example the notion of Christian nationalism, causing many to wonder what Christians actually believe or if what is being espoused is what Jesus actually taught. Second is my work in a Christian organisation seeing people with deeply held beliefs in disagreement. We are not immune to polarization. So how do we navigate those disagreements and still act as one body – the body of Christ?

There are a few things I would have wished for in the book. First, the characters chosen as case studies in the book are well known to us. For example, in Katie Conley's article in this issue she uses David, Joseph, and Moses to illustrate some of her points about discerning our calling. These narratives have a lot for us to glean, and the authors of the book and Katie examine different aspects of those stories. That said, it would be nice to see an examination of lesser-known characters. While the authors selected eleven characters for their case studies, they suggest that those should not be viewed as isolated or unusual and go on to provide a list of other biblical narratives which provide similar lessons (e.g. Jacob, Rahab, Deborah and Barak, Nehemiah, Jonah, and Lydia). I just wish they would have chosen one of them as well. Maybe in the sequel.

My second wish was an acknowledgement of what might be different in this current age and how we might use these lessons to address those issues. For example, in commenting on this review, co-editor Richard Higginson mentioned the impact of social media which can heighten polarization. Similarly, research has shown that people can exhibit more vitriolic behaviour when there is an element of distance or anonymity (i.e., email, text, or posts) than they would exhibit in face-to-face encounters.

In summary, in each of the biblical narratives, the authors remind us that each of the characters were at work, at their job if you will, while accomplishing God's purpose in the world in very challenging times and circumstances. They conclude that the work assignments of each of these people were not incidental to their calling but integral to it. The book challenges the reader to reorient this notion of a polarizing world: polarizing is not new to the current time; to recognise that many before us have navigated rough waters as well and that in the biblical narratives there are examples of living out our calling in a gracious way – a way that seeks the peace and prosperity of the city in which we find ourselves and to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who would like examples of living with purpose in this world and at work.

1. We use the US spelling of polarizing throughout the article to be consistent with the title of the book.
2. Jeremiah 29:7 – "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." Micah 6:7-8 – "What does the Lord require of you, but to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God."

*Most of **Kim Sawers'** career has been at a Christian university in some capacity - faculty or administration. Early in her career she was a Controller and Director of Finance and then earned a PhD in Accounting and moved to faculty as a Professor of Accounting. Kim is an editor of this journal.*