

# Thinking Naughty Thoughts:

A Review

Neil Girrard

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from Johan van der Merwe, *Thinking Naughty Thoughts On Church, And Why I Think We Need to Change*

God said, “On this one will I look [favorably]: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles *at My word.*” (Isa. 66:2) And Paul wrote to Timothy, “Be diligent to present yourself *approved to God*, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Tim. 2:15)

Johan van der Merwe has been in the presence of God and has been changed. The evidence is stamped throughout his book, *Thinking Naughty Thoughts on Church*. The book is an outstanding tour of the heart of a thinking man who has been exposed to *God's* thoughts – there's really nothing “naughty” about this book other than it thinks outside the box men have built “for” God and labeled “church.” For penetrating, conversation-stimulating insights and questions, this book stands in a short list of books that tackle this subject – few so straightforwardly and yet so carefully try to rightly divide the issues of modern churchianity. If one began to pull quotes and insights from this book to demonstrate the quality of this book, one would be hard-pressed to decide which was best and one would feel obliged to include all the many statements that make this book an excellent resource. The time and effort the author has put into this work will likely reap great dividends in the kingdom of God.

But there is a curious weakness throughout the book that may cause some readers difficulty. The book is focused on what occurs in “church” buildings and yet the author claims not to be interested in being a reformer as he has already “jumped ship” and is already apart from the “church.” (p. 15) He finds the fundamentalism of those outside the “church” to be “even uglier” and “more graceless” than that of many still in the “church” (p. 146) Throughout the book, one finds “I agree...” or “I disagree...” as the author tries so hard not to violate anyone's *perspectives* on truth. In this way the author deviates his furthest from the spiritual “format” and “style” found in the sayings of Jesus, the apostles and the prophets of old. Perhaps it is his stated goal, “It has been my aim to make the book both readable and informative, opening up necessary questions in a non-disparaging way while giving enough direction to set out on an educated exploration regarding the questions being asked.” (p. 129), as well as his own aversion to human authority and his recognition that we all need to think for ourselves (p. 64) that keeps van der Merwe from simply ascribing to God what God has revealed to him. Or perhaps it is a latent insecurity that his thoughts about the “church” are, after all, really only his own naughty thoughts and not divinely-granted revelation?

One statement, perhaps above all others, allows this curious weakness to stand out. Van der Merwe writes, “Now that the dust and emotions have settled a bit and I am once again beginning to engage in meaningful conversations with some of the people I once felt abandoned by, is this dawning realisation that the things I felt they directed toward me are the very things they felt I directed toward them. I am beginning to see that my words and actions often communicated to them that I did not see their journeys as valid - that I was the one pointing the finger and shouting: ‘Deceived, off track, false teachers.’ What a great tragedy! What an immense lie! I am truly sorry for the pain and frustration I have caused each and every one of

my friends, and I hope that the way in which I have set out to write this book will help clarify not only my reasons for no longer walking in the same path as you do, but also highlight the great respect I have for each and every one of you. My love for you is not dependent upon our agreement of things, and I can only trust that your love for me is also unconditional.” (p. 167-168)

This book burns in the author’s veins because God has put much of this on his heart. There is indeed great likelihood that the author in times past “pointed the finger” and shouted newly found truths in the power of the flesh, because that was what the author had been trained in, that state of “perpetual spiritual infancy” (p. 71) the “church” keeps the vast majority of its people in. Virtually everyone who has left the “church” has been in this same state and done the same kinds of rebukes – and God has graciously given each of us opportunity to repent and make amends! The “trick” is to continue to speak the truth – the rightly divided word of God as it nestles perfectly into the whole counsel of God – as a truth from God, conveyed in obedience to His authority with as much love as we have attained to and by His Spirit as best we are able at that stage of our development in Christ (just as van der Merwe himself did as a 9-month-old believer at the religious beach camp. – p. 136, also see Eph. 4:15) If one is confident that God has spoken, it is not wrong to say, “Thus says the Lord...” And it is totally unloving to remain silent while a brother in Christ or any other fellow human being runs himself off a cliff because he falsely believes he’s on a good running path. Van der Merwe quotes an awesome question and asks, “Is this what Jesus told you guys to do?” (p. 168) Jesus’ corresponding question is, “Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Lk. 6:46)

The author’s stance between those favor and those who oppose “church” buildings is a case in point. (p. 154) His “I agree...” and “I disagree...” abounds on this page and the central reason of those who oppose “church” buildings do so, he says, is because the buildings don’t exist in the New Testament. How about those who oppose all the “church” deceptions simply because “no lie is of the truth”? (1 Jn. 2:21) It is still a truth that Jesus brought grace *and* truth (Jn. 1:17), not grace *or* truth.

The book’s deepest flaw is its incompleteness – a flaw the author intended to leave in because he has not yet lived where his spiritual journey will take him. (p. 169) There are hints in the book that the author, as will be many of his book’s readers, is too focused on “my journey” and not on total surrender to the King, Christ Jesus. In this book “grace stoops” (97, etc.) but missing is the corresponding truth that Grace does not remain bowed down to our need but rather lifts us up out of the mess where Grace found us. If the author and his readers all come to the truth that “my journey” must take me into *His* body and *His* kingdom – and not just into another form of “my church” – then this book will have done an awesome work.

May God stir His truth to life in all who read this book and may it be used to further God’s kingdom, that realm where Christ is actively and literally obeyed, in the lives of all those who find themselves inside or outside the context of “church.”

Let he who has ears hear.

Neil Girrard  
Paidion Books  
P.O. Box 327  
Capitan, NM 88316  
Website – [www.paidionbooks.org](http://www.paidionbooks.org)  
Email – [paidion@paidionbooks.org](mailto:paidion@paidionbooks.org)

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