

A Review of David Zahl's Low Anthropology

The Unlikely Key to a Gracious View of Others
(and Yourself)

LOW ANTHROPOLOGY



DAVID ZAHL

Low Anthropology, by David Zahl

Co-missioners,

Are you looking for ways to talk about the Gospel with people who can't imagine needing it? If so, we send you notice of a book you'll want to buy. It was published only last month.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

A Review of David Zahl's *Low Anthropology*

by Bruce K. Modahl

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Someone comes to you in a state of distress. They have questions about their life and faith. They wonder if there is any meaning or purpose for them. At the end of the conversation, you scan your shelves, hoping some book will present itself as one to help them address their questions. The books you find on those shelves are from a previous generation. They will not do for today.

In a Facebook post, David Zahl cites the above experience as motivation for writing this book. Zahl serves on the staff of Christ Episcopal Church in Charlottesville, Virginia, which provides campus ministry to University of Virginia students. He is also the founder and director of [Mockingbird Ministries](#) and the author of the critically acclaimed book [Seculosity](#). Zahl has been a keynote speaker at two Crossings conferences.



David Zahl

In the introduction, Zahl expands on his reason for writing. First, in his ten years of working with students from the University of Virginia, he has seen an increase in the number of students who are anxious and unhappy with their lives. From 2007 to 2019, the number of students with prescriptions for antidepressants or anti-anxiety medication has doubled.

Second, in twenty years of preaching at different churches around the country he has found that the sermons people remember are the ones which assume that the listener is suffering.

Third, he cites the deep division and acrimony in our country. Each side assumes their point of view is infallible.

Finally, he finds that religion in general and Christianity in particular do not make sense to many people today. Words like sin and salvation are scarcely intelligible.

He closes this section writing, “[M]y concern moves beyond ecclesial or confessional loyalties. Because no matter our religious background or beliefs, we are all well acquainted with the fallout of tireless perfectionism. It is killing us.”

But why “low anthropology”—as something we should embrace? What Zahl means by the term is what we mean when we confess in church before God and everyone around us that “we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.” That is low anthropology. The problem is we leave church and, by our words and actions, show that we think we are very much capable of freeing ourselves. Like everyone else, we can’t bear being wrong. We are caught up in the same tireless drive to be right(eous). That is high anthropology. But it is not the truth about us. Expecting perfection of ourselves or those around us causes misery all around.

Zahl suggests that words like sin and salvation are scarcely intelligible, so our captivity to sin is not the place to begin the conversation. Zahl does not avoid talking about sin. However, he is more inclined to begin with the symptoms of sin. He has a gift for translating insider language into words that appeal to those who are biblically unschooled and put off by theological language.

For example, Zahl quotes Giles Fraser, “[Jesus] wants us to feel that we cannot do what morality demands... and he does so because he’s pointing to something beyond morality.” Zahl goes on to write, “Jesus confronts us with our limits, not to discourage us

but to engineer a situation in which the phrase 'what is impossible with man is possible with God' might find traction. Faith in God begins where faith in oneself ends."

Zahl has just explained how God employs the law to accuse us. God uses the law not to drive us to despair, but to drive us to faith in God. What I miss hearing from Zahl at this juncture is any word about Jesus' death and resurrection as the good news which meets us at the opposite end of the law's accusation.

Zahl begins his book with a section titled "The Shape of Low Anthropology." The shape of low anthropology follows the contours that acknowledge our limitations. Zahl says that accepting our limitations frees us to have compassion on ourselves and others. We see how much we all need each other. Modesty really is the best policy for our relationships with others and for our own emotional health.

Zahl uses the term doubleness. Paul explained the doubleness that affects all of us by saying he wanted to do what is good. But the evil he did not want to do is what he ended up doing. The shape of low anthropology includes the acknowledgement that human beings are self-centered. Zahl calls self-centeredness *control freaks anonymous*.

The center section of the book focuses on the mechanics of low anthropology, how we avoid it and its fruits when we embrace it. The final section of the book focuses on how low anthropology plays out in our lives: in relationships, politics, and religion.



Homeless Jesus Statue, photo by Jerome Burce

The last chapter of the book is entitled "Low Anthropology in Religion." I suggest reading this chapter first. In this reader's opinion, it provides the scaffolding for all the rest. The foundation is provided by the statement Zahl quotes from his father, an Episcopal priest: "The lower your anthropology, the higher your Christology will be."

Zahl builds from this statement. He says a low anthropology holds God to his promises rather than usurp the reins. A religion of low anthropology does not, in Zahl's words, "recalibrate the law of God or propagate rumors about the human ability to fulfill it. Instead, it allows God's voice to speak at full volume." In so doing God intends to force us to look away from ourselves and look to God for deliverance.

Zahl is right to begin with God's promises before unfolding God's use of the law. I would like to hear from Zahl what those promises are. To be sure, I can find them throughout the book. I long to hear a summary of those promises at this point.

The question remains: Is this just another self-help book? Zahl says it is not. Nadia Bolz-Weber, in her testament on the book jacket, says it is not. Low anthropology and self-help contradict each other. However, the book has some of the markings of self-help volumes. They all expose some problem or other in our thinking and behavior. They all offer solutions in ten steps, twelve keys, or twenty-four best practices. Zahl does not do the latter. However, I can envision someone divining rubrics for us to adopt in order to achieve happiness in a life of low anthropology.

Over the years, I have attended enough traveling medicine shows of the I'm-ok-you're-ok, road-less-traveled variety to know I come away burdened with pages of notes detailing what I need to get busy doing and feeling worse about my life and abilities than before I entered the arena.

There is one sentence in the book that decides the matter for me. Zahl writes, "[A] religion of low anthropology tends to resonate with those who find themselves defeated by life rather than with folks on the upward swing."

Self-help books are written by those on the upward swing. Zahl writes from the place the rest of us find ourselves. We are people in desperate need of God grace. God's grace is what I heard from Zahl from beginning to end in this book. This is why I highly recommend the book. Zahl delivers God's mercy as balm for our wounded souls.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use

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