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**Reviews of Books / Comptes Rendus: Words upon the Word: An
Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study : James Bielo New York: New
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Peter Schuurman

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on le dit incorrectement ; je deviens proprement le Christ lorsque la parole de Jésus féconde la mienne » (226). Les quatre critères de discernement qui apparaissent en conclusion n'auraient-ils pas pu intervenir plus rapidement pour corriger une lecture éventuellement tronquée des Évangiles ? Ce livre est à lire pour tous les pèlerins en quête de liberté et gageons que le prochain livre de Bergeron approfondira ces critères de discernement pour un monde trop souvent soumis aux seules lois du marché.

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Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study

James Bielo

New York: New York University Press, 2009. Paperback, 187 pp.

Given the size of the evangelical movement worldwide, it is surprising that no in-depth ethnographic study has been done of a small evangelical group. Bielo claims that 30 million Protestants are involved in such groups in the US alone and yet, beyond Wuthnow's *I Come Away Stronger* (1994) and *Sharing the Journey* (1994) as well as Jody Shapiro Davie's *Women in the Presence: Constructing Community and Seeking Spirituality in Mainline Protestantism* (1995), there is little to show in the literature. *Words upon the Word* thus comes as a welcome addition to research not only on Evangelicalism, but on the small group movement more generally.

What gives this work an edge beyond previous research is the extensive qualitative data it draws upon; it is a relatively short book based upon an impressive amount of fieldwork. Bielo attended a total of 19 different groups from 6 different congregations over 19 months, which came down to 324 meetings and 500 hours of participant observation. Gender-wise, 11 of these groups were mixed-gender, 4 were men's groups, and 4 were women's groups. Not inattentive to the dynamics his presence brought to these groups, Bielo did his best to be an inconspicuous witness who did not alter the flow of conversation.

The choice of terms for the subject matter, however, seems to miss the mark. Although the title of the book names the focus as "Bible study" and the cover of the book is actually a clever photo of a page from the personal Bible of one of Bielo's subjects, it becomes apparent as one reads that many of the groups were not in fact Bible studies. Some were book studies, others followed a Christian video curriculum, and one group that was in fact a Bible study spent an equal amount of time in personal sharing and prayer. In sum, Bielo reveals that groups that study Christian books instead of the Bible are more representative of his research (111).

An anthropologist by training, Bielo uses an approach building on a theory of practice that sees culture as built from institutions, reading, and discourse, and the dialectics and tensions within them. He begins with an interesting reflexive chapter on his ethnographic experience and follows it with five chapters that build on five themes. The first is entitled "Reading the Bible," which explicates the evangelical approach to Scripture, especially the weight of divine authority it carries and the hyper-emphasis on application to

everyday life. In the next chapter, “Cultivating Intimacy,” Bielo demonstrates that while the obvious purpose of gathering seems to be religious education, “the guiding expectation of meeting together is to cultivate intimacy and thereby grow in personal faith” (77). “Integrating Participant Interests” highlights how group structure forms around common interests beyond just Evangelical identity, and how a “textual economy” is at work, allocating different values to various texts. Highlighting the passion for practical application, the chapter on “Preparing to Witness” uncovers how “good” and “bad” evangelistic behavior arises from small group discourse. Finally, “Negotiating Self and Other” explores evangelical attention to defining one’s identity in contrast to other religious identities in a culture of fading denominationalism.

The strengths of the book include its conciseness, readability, and rich but selective use of conversations extracted from Bielo’s vast ethnographic data. Wisely, each of the chapters draws evidence from one particular small group—a group whose meeting culture nicely highlights the theme he is exploring—rather than extracting bits and pieces from his total data set of 19 groups.

The book concludes by suggesting further research, such as an examination of how small group facilitators conceptualize their leadership, and the entertaining idea of Bible study groups as a model for constructive dialogue in civil society. While Bielo is very cautious about the latter, his book certainly demonstrates that there is a vast subterranean world of evangelical activity that is a productive site for religious culture in America. This text will, hopefully, attract more attention to the field of small group research, a large and diverse field ripe and waiting for further scholarly investigation.

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The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism

John Coffey and Paul C.H. Lim, eds

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xi + 385 pp.

Few terms in the early-modern historiographical lexicon are more contested than “Puritanism”. Arguments about its definition have raged for several decades, showing few signs of abating. The *Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* does a splendid job of capturing the cut and thrust of this continuing debate. The bench of contributors is superb, the book reminds us of some of the major advances in Puritan studies, and the chapters combine insights that will benefit both specialists and those who are less well-versed in the existing literature.

The first survey chapters chart the rise and fall of English Puritanism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. All are wise, reliable, and attuned to current debates. Next, and here we encounter the best part of the book, there is a section on Puritanism outside England. North American Puritanism has always received its fair share of attention, and this is ably reflected in two excellent chapters, but the editors deserve special credit for commissioning pieces on the Puritan experience in Ireland and Wales (handled deftly by Crawford Gribben, who sees some sense in positioning earlier Puritan