

Sauter, G 1995 — The question of meaning: A theological and philosophical orientation

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans. Paperback, 157 pages. Price: Unknown

Reviewer: Dr Gafie van Wyk

The question of meaning was for a long time the main topic of discussion in theology and philosophy. There was even a time when it ranked as the decisive religious question not only in Christian theology but also in the pastoral care of the sick, suffering and dying. 'But' says Sauter 'the longer [I consider this] the more I become convinced that not by a long way does this question bring new life to the question of God, as for many years it was expected to do. I have been forced to conclude that it is really a seeking of idols'. What is the force behind this conclusion? To be able to demonstrate his point of view the author needs to ask what the question of meaning itself means. Sauter probes beyond the quest for meaning and questions whether the modern quest for meaning is in fact meaningful or whether it weakens our perceptions of everyday reality and so confuses our understanding of reality. His conclusions lead him to a new quest. How can one discover sense while encountering a contingent reality?

The German word 'Sinn' means both meaning and sense. Sauter reevaluates the differences and the connections between meaning and sense. He argues that as the word 'sense' seems to find a home in linguistic philosophy, it undergoes a decisive change in its own field of meaning and experiences incalculable expansion. Sense is first the relation of an action or statement to what is intended. We ask what is the point of life, action, or speech. 'Sense' has become the substance of a text or statement. The term then comes to mean the same as 'purpose' and 'value'. The inquiring mind tries to find the ultimate meaning from which all that is penultimate receives its relative value. Finally the term indicates that the detail can receive its meaning only from the whole and can thus be posited only in the light of the whole. The term is now a category of reality. To ask about sense or meaning is no less than to ask about what is real. The result of this development is that absolute meaning is needed if we are to be able to live. This is what it now means to ask about meaning. In this way the search for meaning becomes the quest for God, for God is the name we give for that entity that gives meaning to our world. This expansion of the question of meaning, however, leads to a progressive reduction of the perception of what it is that gives form to live. Perception is no longer orientation, because it only involves taking action to arrange and relate things.

Sauter is convinced that the question of meaning in the narrower sense is posed when something seems to be unintelligible, unrelated or without foundation and one seeks to justify what happens and the

way it happens. Starting with an exegesis of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 Sauter argues that it is enough for us to ask after meaning but we must not try to achieve it ourselves. With this argument the author distinguishes between the need for orientation that is rightly ours and the need for justification that crosses the boundaries of our humanity. It is not that God does not allow us any fulfilled life. But this fullness is not to be measured by what we can basically make or represent as individuals or as mankind. What we can justify when we ask about meaning, leads us into self-justification. But, no human can really achieve such justification by himself. One knows very well the difference between the meaningful and the meaningless. But if one tries to know more, if one tries to search out the world's nexus of meaning, it would surely lead to self-justification, for hereby one tries to see the nexus of God's working. To attempt to understand the nexus of God's working is to yield to temptation. If we live in the confidence that all that takes place in this world comes from God, even though the understanding of it all is hidden from us, we can find joy in life.

Sauter characterizes meaning as perception deriving from the creatureliness that is directed by God himself to his coming. 'Thus the question of meaning may be stamped by a knowing not-knowing, that is, knowing that the world does not move dumbly around in circles but that we may see in it that which sustains and upholds it, God's creative working Meaning may be perceived as a trace of God's action in its free working'. Creation has meaning in the hands of the Creator. 'To perceive our existence in such a way as to see it as God's word is to inquire into meaning'. Any other attempt to find or create meaning is a seeking of idols.

This attempt to give a short resume of Sauter's argument cannot be anything more than a mere glance at the subject that is under discussion. Sauter discusses many attempts to construct new areas of orientation on the question of meaning. He deals with questions of hermeneutics, philosophy of language, psychology, sociology, social theory and politics. One can hardly get involved in the debate on meaning without taking notice of this book. With a brilliant and in-depth discussion of the topic, Sauter must have forced many scholars to rethink their point of view. This book is a must for every theologian who asks the question of meaning.
