

Review: *Theological Fitness*, by Aimee Byrd

By Mike Myers

In 2015 Aimee Byrd published her second book *Theological Fitness: Why We Need a Fighting Faith* (TF), a project that grew out of work she did while teaching a ladies' Bible study on the book of Hebrews (TF, 13). The book itself focuses on her explication of Hebrews 10:23, a text that summarizes the practical thrust of the epistle. In order to communicate the elements of exertion and perseverance needed in the Christian life, she weaves the metaphor of physical exercise throughout. The book itself, like most of *Housewife Theologian*, fits nicely into the Reformed tradition and is a good natured effort to encourage fellow Christians to godliness and perseverance in the Christian life. As I understood it, here is her thesis, target, and goal, respectively:

Thesis: "Theological fitness, then, refers to that persistent fight to exercise our faith by actively engaging in the gospel truth revealed in God's Word" (TF, 16)

Target: "I am writing to every Christian who would like to have a better understanding of who God is and what he has done" (TF, 16).

Goal: To unpack Hebrews 10:23 and encourage her readers; "To serve you like your favorite song that gets you pumped up for your next event" (TF, 19).

Here is a brief summary of *Theological Fitness*. My analysis comments are in *italics*.

Chapter 1: Since the Christian life is a long race, God wisely ordains the Church for mutual encouragement and help. Together, believers must aid one another upon the path to glory, sticking together and taking hold of the promises He has given us in the Word.

Chapter 2: In the midst of that community, however, it can become easy to compare yourself to others unnecessarily. She discourages believers from doing so, asking this question, "Do you ever size up someone else's spiritual maturity and compare it to your own? How ugly is that" (TF, 43). *While comparisons can certainly become an idolatrous pitfall for a believer, there is a place for comparing ourselves to others, or at the very least looking up to others who are more mature. Paul says, "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us" (Phil. 3:17; cf. 1 Cor. 4:16, 11:1). I do not think Mrs. Byrd intended to take away from Paul's godly exhortation, but distinguishing between ungodly and godly comparisons would have strengthened this chapter.*

Chapter 3: Moving on from the corporate elements of the Christian life, Mrs. Byrd begins to address the individual importance of holding fast. She urges her readers to persevere by continuing to look to Christ, to listen well to sermons (TF, 64), all the while remembering that Christ Himself is our Anchor (TF, 75-76).

Chapter 4: Here Mrs. Byrd addresses the role and place of suffering and the necessity of enduring well through those seasons. Citing the stern rebuke from Hebrews 5:12-14, she elaborates on the importance of growth with a view to benefiting others (TF, 86). The latter part of this chapter seeks to press home the importance of theology for the practical Christian life (TF, 92).

Chapters 5 and 6: I found this portion of the work most intriguing. By way of Psalm 110, Mrs. Byrd sets forth the person and work of Christ through the structure of the Apostles' Creed. Her encouragement here is that her readers know more thoroughly those things that they confess, particularly about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Chapters 7 and 8: Although she dealt with suffering generally in the fourth chapter, here Mrs. Byrd addresses the particular place of the Lord's chastisement of his people. While holding forth the faithfulness of both Father and Son, she also warns against the dangers of backsliding and apostasy. Using the imagery of the dreaded workout 'plateau,' she encourages her readers to continue to challenge themselves spiritually, to avoid pride, and to seek humility (TF, 148-150).

Chapter 9: Here Mrs. Byrd develops her covenant theology. Although she stays within the framework of Westminster's covenant theology, she seems to intermix the ideas of Suzerain-vassal treaties *a la* Michael Horton but then pivots away from that concept by quoting Louis Berkhof's explanation of the covenant formation (TF, 160-161). Her major takeaway here is that by virtue of God's eternal promise, which she assigns to the Covenant of Redemption, Adam's failure in the Covenant of Works is undone by the Second Adam's fulfillment of the same. This results in Jesus securing the blessings of the Covenant of Grace for His people. For that reason, the weight of expectation is both laid upon and fulfilled by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Chapter 10: She brings this work to an end by elaborating on the importance of corporate worship and rest on the Lord's Day and the terrible restlessness that will characterize the ungodly for eternity. Each gathering of the Church on the first day of the week is a small taste of the rest to come.

In my view, this book was important to Mrs. Byrd for two different reasons. First, she obviously put in a lot of work organizing her thoughts and setting them down to the page, focusing upon a topic dear not only to her heart, but to all true Christians. I believe the second reason for its importance is very different from the first: by her own admission, this book did not sell particularly well. On January 17, 2020, she posted a reflection on her work entitled [*My Worst-Selling Book*](#). Describing *Theological Fitness*, she wrote, "It's about how important our confession of hope is to our perseverance in the Christian life. I didn't want it to be a women's book, because it's not a 'women's message.' But I found that my writing and *my* target in that book really didn't have a *marketable* target. Books marketed to women's studies are fluffier, lighter, and my writing was a bit over their head. This is sad, as it isn't an academic book by any means. I was hoping that it would serve as a positive challenge to popular-level reading" (italics original). She then posits another theory: in addition to writing above the level of most consumers of women's resources, she believes she was not taken seriously by men. "And, maybe even sadder, men didn't take it seriously. I remember one conversation I had with a well-meaning pastor when the book came out. He said that he suggested the women in his church use my book for their next study. I thanked him and said, 'You know, it's not a women's book. The men in your church can read it too.' He and the other pastor beside him looked at each other and laughed. They laughed. Then they switched the conversation to something else. This was my worst-selling book."

I think here Mrs. Byrd may be guilty of giving herself a bit too much credit and perhaps misattributing the blame for her low sales. While I agree that her work was not "an academic book by any means," I think there may have been another reason it did not sell very widely, and it was almost certainly not due to men not taking her seriously (the idea that women are not being taken seriously arises as a fairly prominent theme in *No Little Women*). *Theological Fitness* was not full of error, but, in all honesty, neither was it very profound. Though the exercise imagery was understandable as a unifying theme, in my opinion she stretched it a bit much at times. One could just as easily assign blame for the book's poor sales to *Theological Fitness* being neither particularly insightful nor very compelling.

I believe that this book and her own comments demonstrate this book as a turning point for Mrs. Byrd's published writing. The tone and target of her works change from this point out. Near the end of her blog post on her worst selling book, Mrs. Byrd continues to reflect on her chosen direction in writing (keep in mind that at the time of this post, she had published her third and fourth books and was awaiting the publication of her fifth): "Writing friends also advised me that maybe I should give this gender stuff a break. This book will pigeonhole me, and I am capable of writing on much broader topics. Ah, but that's the whole point. Remember my worst-selling book?" This left me wondering: what is "the whole point" to which she referred? Perhaps my examinations of her other books will make that clear.