

Review: The Unbiased Self

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The Unbiased Self: The Psychology of Overcoming Cognitive Bias

By Erin Devers (IVP)

Texans know Texas BBQ is unsurpassed. Memphis and Kansas City have their own ideas about the best BBQ. And then there's Carolina BBQ. Each one is right in their own eyes.

Erin Devers doesn't smoke out the best BBQ, but she does shine a light  on a common human malady—the inability to know everything about everything all the time. Bias results from our human limitations.

“We want to be right and feel good about ourselves,” Devers asserts. This desire leads us to think we are more moral than we are and have more control over our lives than we do. Bias begins here.

Bias can be an incendiary word today. But this isn't a book about racial, gender, ableist or other specific expressions of bias—though racial bias does make an appearance in the last chapter. Rather, this is a book about dealing with the log in our own eyes, Devers contends, referring to one of Jesus' parables.

We can spot other people's biases, but we often are blind to our own. Devers seeks to move readers from a pursuit of feeling right to a pursuit of accuracy.

Bias is part of being human, a feature of our creaturely limitations. We

can't process everything about everything. Devers explains how our minds naturally create categories for the sake of efficiency and filter new information through these mental categories.

Our biases are exploitable and used by those in the know to grab our attention and manipulate our thoughts.

Devers counters internal bias—thinking or believing better of ourselves than we actually are. She emphasizes rooting our identity in Christ and his salvation from our sin nature, rather than in our self-identification and sense of measuring up to our own ideal self and what we believe others expect of us.

She also counsels against “downward social comparisons” by which we attempt to boost our self-esteem through measuring ourselves against people—and even animals—we see as less than ourselves.

After diagnosing the problem, Devers turns to overcoming it, starting with the pursuit of accuracy. Accuracy calls for slow thinking and interrogating why we want something to be true. This and other ways of pursuing accuracy positions a person for better fast thinking. Here, Devers suggests practical ways to improve thinking, one benefit being to reduce bias.

Reducing bias is beneficial not only for ourselves. It also makes us better neighbors, something captured in the command to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Devers returns to a point she makes repeatedly in her chapters on reducing bias—“our position relative to God and others.” We generally are more like each other than we are like God. To combat bias, Devers encourages generosity in our thinking about others.

The Unbiased Self finishes with an examination of group identity bias, specifically in the church.

A cautionary note: Readers should be aware Chapter Six opens with some examination of the horrific school shooting in Uvalde.

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