



**READING JOHN: A LITERARY AND THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY ON THE FOURTH GOSPEL AND JOHANNINE EPISTLES**, by Charles H. Talbert. New York: Crossroad, 1992. Pp. 284. \$23.95.

Engaging, solid, and attractively written, this commentary can be welcomed by those who preach and teach John’s gospel and epistles. It sets forth the religious message of these texts in a clear and compelling way. The text does not follow the word-by-word approach to commenting, but seeks to understand the meaning of entire episodes and their relationship to the gospel as a whole. Several comments about developments in Johannine studies can help place Talbert’s contribution in perspective.

First, we should note how a grasp of the gospel’s historical and cultural context informs interpretation. The well-known commentary by Rudolf Bultmann interpreted John’s gospel as an anti-gnostic polemic; later, a landmark study by J. Louis Martyn held that John’s gospel should be read primarily in light of the Christian community’s conflict with Judaism. Talbert, however, insists that John’s gospel is a narrative theology that addresses *multiple life situations* (63). The evangelist deals with friction with the synagogue, challenges from some of John the Baptist’s followers, internal division, and various christological questions. By drawing on a wide range of Jewish, Hellenistic, and early Christian sources, and by making them accessible in a readable, non-technical way, Talbert helps to show how the gospel could speak to readers of various backgrounds. Unlike most scholars, Talbert maintains that the Johannine epistles were written before or about the same time as the gospel. Since the issues addressed by the epistles differ from those in the gospel, this approach reinforces the notion that a number of issues should be kept in mind when reading all of these texts. Although many would disagree that the epistles pre-date the gospel, the emphasis on multiple life situations is well taken.

Second, there is the question of a Johannine approach to mission. John’s gospel has long enjoyed enormous popularity with Christians in all parts of the world, who treasure its rich presentation of Jesus as “the light of the world,” “the bread of life,” “the good shepherd,” etc., and its pithy summaries of the gospel message (e.g., John 3:16). Some scholars, however, have argued that Johannine Christianity is sectarian, that the gospel is generally unintelligible to the uninitiated, and that it reinforces Christian isolation from the world. Talbert is one of a number of scholars who rightly challenge this reading of the gospel. According to John’s gospel, Christians are not “of the world” but they are sent “into the world” (John 17:16-18). It is precisely because the church is distinct from the world that it can engage the world. “The Johannine community recognized that the basis of that mission is christology and that the only christology that is effective is one that put humans into living contact with God” (79).

Theologically, the treatment of specific passages is generally judicious and helpful. A good example concerns the relationship of a beggar’s congenital blindness to sin. Jesus said, “Neither this man sinned nor his parents sinned; (he was born blind) so that God’s works might be revealed in him” (John 9:3). One potential problem is suggested by the NRSV translation,

which is quoted here with parentheses added to identify words that do not appear in Greek. The extra words give the impression that God caused the blindness in order to carry out his purpose. Talbert rightly points out that Jesus rejected the idea that sin caused this man's blindness but he gave no alternative explanation of the cause, proceeding instead to declare God's will for the pres-

ent. "Since the problem exists (for whatever reason), there is a divine necessity for Jesus to do God's work so that it may be manifest in the man" (159). A second potential difficulty is that Jesus' words are sometimes taken as a virtual denial that actions have consequences. Again Talbert rightly comments that sin is excluded as the cause of suffering in this instance, but that we cannot generalize this to mean that there is never a connection between sin and suffering.

One question I would put to Talbert's work concerns the place of Jesus' death in the gospel story. He said the gospel speaks of the "one who came as revealing, empowering presence," producing a new community, and providing for its future "life, worship, and ministry before he returned to whence he had come" (64). The gospel sometimes describes the course of Jesus' ministry primarily as his descent from God and return to God (e.g., 7:28, 33; 13:3; 16:28) with the cross as one stage in Jesus' departure. Yet the crucifixion dominates the gospel: in the beginning Jesus is introduced as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29); in the middle he promises to "draw all people" to himself by being lifted up in death (12:32-33) and he foreshadows the scandal of his death by washing the disciples feet (13:1-11); at the end, the scars of crucifixion identify the risen Jesus (20:19-29). Although Talbert's comments on the crucifixion itself are quite useful, the role of the crucifixion in the gospel as a whole should be given greater stress.

Some preachers and teachers have found the depth in the Johannine writings to be more of a problem than a gift. The imagery can suggest so many interpretive possibilities that it is difficult to know where to begin. The encyclopedic quality of some of the standard commentaries can also be intimidating. Talbert's work is readable and modest in length, inviting engagement with the biblical texts themselves.

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**DICTIONARY OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT**, ed. by Nicholas Lossky, et al.  
Geneva: WCC Publications and Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1991. Pp. 1106. \$79.99.

If you are the sort of reader who goes to the encyclopedia to look something up and ends up reading about other things, too, you will relish this fine reference work. More than eleven hundred pages long, it is a storehouse of information on the modern ecumenical movement.

Published under the auspices of the World Council of Churches, this *Dictionary* is concerned primarily with modern ecumenism. Historians and others who note a certain narrowness of vision characteristic of contemporary ecumenism on the official level may regard the decision to focus this work on the modern era as unfortunate, but other readers may consider this a strength. The articles fall into several categories. The most extensive survey a doctrinal theme or activity in an entire area. Shorter entries focus on specific topics. Briefer still are notices

designed for quick reference on a variety of topics. Bibliographies are brief and weighted toward English titles and works with further bibliographical references. Cross references are abundant and are complemented by excellent indices of subjects and names. A list of authors identifies the articles written by each.

A survey of some entries under the letter B offers a sense of the work as a whole. The first entry in this section is a brief biographical article on Christian Goncalves Kwami Baëta, a Presbyterian missionary leader from Ghana. It illustrates the inclusion in this work of persons still living at the time of publication. A lengthy article on baptism is by a Roman Catholic author. Max Thurian, also a Roman Catholic, provides an essay on *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, a document he himself helped draft. A number of articles follow on matters relating to the Baptist churches. Among the longer biographical articles is one on the English bishop, G. K. A. Bell, accompanied by a fine photograph of the bishop in mufti. A compact article on the Bible by a Swiss theologian includes a proportionally lengthy section on “The Bible in the Life of the

WCC.” A very useful section on bibliographies is an orientation to other resources. An article on “Bio-ethics” by J. Robert Nelson of the United States followed by another on “Birth Control” by a French ethicist illustrate the inclusion of material on social and ethical questions. The final entry under B, an article on Sergius Bulgakov, is a sample of entries on the Orthodox tradition appearing throughout the work.

Questions about authors and topics in a volume like this are inevitable. Every reader would do it differently. The roster of contributors for this volume, however, gives evidence of considerable breadth and competence. The choice of authors also indicates that the articles will by and large be sympathetic to the history of the WCC and its antecedents. A significant number of these writers are, in fact, professional ecumenists and their articles not surprisingly reflect the commitments and causes of their guild. The list of topics is occasionally surprising. An article on the *filioque* clause is included but there is no article specifically on the papacy, certainly a critical factor in contemporary ecumenism. The index of subjects which cites a number of references to the papal office, however, helps to remedy this deficiency. I was left to muse on the absence of some contemporary critics of conciliar ecumenism. There might, for example, have been an article on Ernst Käsemann whose explosive lecture on “Unity and Multiplicity in the New Testament Doctrine of the Church” at the Fourth World Conference for Faith and Order in Montreal (July 1963) was said to have made General Secretary Willem Visser ‘t Hooft so angry that the Dutchman would not shake the German’s hand. Käsemann’s clash with Raymond Brown at that meeting is but briefly noted in an article on hermeneutics.

Such questions ought not detract from the solid worth of this fine book. Pastors and theologians will want to know about it, and it should be in the reference section of all large theological libraries.

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**THE CHURCHING OF AMERICA 1776-1990: WINNERS AND LOSERS IN OUR RELIGIOUS ECONOMY**, by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers

University Press, 1992. Pp.325. \$22.95.

Mainline wisdom says that Christianity in America is fading. The glory has departed from Zion. Good taste and a modicum of social action (prescribed by denominational headquarters) will occupy the shrinking remnant. Why try to make new converts, if Christianity really has no salvation to offer? If we must decline, let's at least do it gracefully.

*The Churching of America* exposes this timid view of American Christianity for what it is: a minority report. Based on careful statistical research, sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark argue that "the master trend of American religious history" is not decline but "a long, slow, and consistent increase in religious participation" (274). Only 17 percent of Americans were church members in 1776, but by 1980 the rate of church membership was a strong 60 percent. *The Churching of America* explains why membership rates grew so dramatically, which groups contributed most to the rise in religious adherence, and which groups failed to benefit over the past two centuries.

*The Churching of America* presents lively case studies of "upstart sects" which began as outsiders but achieved dramatic membership growth. Spurned by the more respectable churches, the early Methodists were known for hearty singing, stern discipline, and aggressive evangelism. By 1850 the Methodists had crested as the biggest church in America, with 34.2 percent of all church members. Then success and affluence began to soften the zeal of former times. Educated, settled clergy replaced the unlettered frontier preachers. Revivals, once the prolific source of new converts and church members, became more genteel and less frequent. Unhappy with the gentrification of Methodism, several dissatisfied groups (Free Methodists, Nazarenes, and the holiness movement) broke away while still others went over to the Baptists in search of the old time fervor. The once-ex-

uberant Methodists had become a mainline church in decline.

The Southern Baptist story, in contrast, illustrates a numerically successful group striving to maintain a sect-like stance in the world. Finke and Stark focus on Southern Baptist controversies over the nature of scriptural authority and what should be taught about this in Baptist seminaries. What happens when a seminary professor undermines the beliefs of the people who pay the bills? Finke and Stark explore how the autonomy of local Southern Baptist churches and the direct accountability of pastors to their congregations has, to a great extent, helped preserve a distinctive Southern Baptist faith. Throughout, Finke and Stark are refreshingly free of condescension in their treatment of the religious needs and experiences of ordinary people.

*The Churching of America* is not limited to Protestants. Finke and Stark tell the story of Roman Catholicism in America with respect and verve. Roman Catholicism in this country has been a highly creative and successful venture with an admirable history. Roman Catholics built impressive school systems, practiced revivalism in distinctively Catholic ways, and held together an ethnic mosaic of Germans, Slovaks, and Hispanics under Irish leadership. And they did all this in a hostile environment. Nor did the Catholics merely reap the windfall profits of immigration. The majority of the "Catholic" immigrants were such in name only. They had to be recruited, evangelized, and transformed into faithful Chris-

tians. The authors identify several key ingredients of the Catholic success story: dedicated priests and nuns who took tough assignments for low pay, and the power of Catholic communities to demand sacrifices of their members and give substantial rewards in return. Finke and Stark examine the effects of Vatican II upon Roman Catholicism in America and offer reasons why so few young adults now seek religious vocations.

The most controversial part of the book is its use of market concepts to analyze the Methodist, Baptist, and Roman Catholic stories. These and other groups operate within the “religious economy” in which “firms” (sects or denominations) compete for “market shares” (members). Dominant groups may form “cartels” to control access to the market. Where religion is a matter of choice, religious groups vie for members—and the marketplace “is as unforgiving of ineffective religious firms as it is of their commercial counterparts” (17). Monopoly firms tend to be lazy, but a pluralistic, free-market religious economy means stiff competition, greater market penetration, and increasing public participation. Pluralism is a threat only for those groups that don’t want to evangelize or don’t know how.

The model of a religious economy enables Finke and Stark to compare and contrast specific features of growing groups with those of declining ones, weighing factors such as organization, product, packaging, marketing, and the cost and benefits of membership. Finke and Stark do not reduce religion to economics—but they do use marketing savvy to identify specific reasons why some religious organizations prosper and others decline.

Within the overall religious economy, groups operate at different levels of tension with the culture. The higher the tension, the more sectlike the group. The lower the tension, the more church-like or “main-line” the group. Secularization is the lowering of tension between a religious group and its surrounding culture. This is not a dead end, but part of a larger cycle which has been played out in America ever since the first Puritan sects became established churches only to be eclipsed by upstart sects like the Methodists and Baptists. When denominations reject traditional doctrines and cease to make serious demands on their followers, they cease to prosper. “Religious organizations are stronger to the degree that they impose significant costs in terms of sacrifice and even stigma upon their members” (238). Groups that ask less of their members offer fewer rewards and are continually plagued by “free riders” who seek the benefits of church membership without sharing the costs. This further reduces the costs and rewards of membership until there is little reason to stay in a church, much less join it.

Shrinking groups may try to retrench by uniting with others who are also in decline. In a provocative chapter entitled “Why Unification Efforts Fail,” Finke and Stark argue that only waning churches pursue mergers. When “secularization has so eroded commitment that doctrinal differences no longer provide a reason to sustain separate organizations” merger becomes attractive. But churches that are thriving have no incentive to join “and a merger of failing groups cannot fulfill the ecumenical hope” (236).

Finke and Stark contend that “the primary feature of our religious history” is that “the mainline bodies are always headed for the sideline” (275). Ecumenists and church administrators will gnash their teeth at Finke and Stark. Populists will cheer and historians will argue. Pastors and congregations will ask themselves if the shoe fits. No one can read this book without applying it to the churches they know best.

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**GOD AS TRINITY: RELATIONALITY AND TEMPORALITY IN DIVINE LIFE**, by Ted Peters. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993. Pp. 240. \$14.99 (paper).

In *God as Trinity* Ted Peters takes us, as he puts it, on a tour through trinitarian thinking. It's a good book. Rather, it's two good books bound into one, a two-tiered tour. That's my assessment, not Peters', not the publishers'. However, readers of this review can benefit from knowing this

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ahead of time, "proleptically," as Peters would say. My postulate of two books arises because the book appears to address two distinct audiences. One audience is students and pastors; the other is more scholarly, academic types. You, the reader, might be both. Readers who are either one audience or the other will find it handy that the two books distinguish themselves readily, and thereby readably, according to chapters.

Chapter one, "Introducing the Task of Trinity Talk," and chapter two, "A Map of Contemporary Issues," are excellent for students and pastors. Here Peters shows himself to be the excellent teacher he is. Teacher Ted makes trinity talk accessible without unduly downsizing what is theologically at stake in whatever issue is under discussion.

In chapter one he demonstrates why the doctrine of the trinity is important for talking about how God is related to the world. In the process he rightly refutes the attitude of some strands of the Christian tradition which refuse to take up trinitarian issues because God is, of course, a mystery. Such theological sleight of hand merely excuses doctrinal obscurity. He also refutes the assumption that the big issue for trinitarian thinking is arithmetic—how to get one to equal three—which, of course, leaves the whole issue unresolvable.

Peters' focus in chapter two is how twentieth-century theologians have, since Karl Barth, turned specifically to trinitarian thinking in order to express why and how God is both beyond the world and intimate with the world. We occasionally overhear the classical trinitarian discourse because contemporary trinity talk is conversing with the promises and problems of the classic discussion. He structures chapter two around twelve contemporary issues. Among the issues are: Is the doctrine of the trinity outmoded? Is trinitarian language hopelessly sexist? Are Christians monotheists? Is the trinity interreligious? Is the trinity tied to substantialist [Greek] metaphysics? In this chapter we hear the thinking of twentieth-century luminaries like Barth, Moltmann, and Pannenberg, as well as Peters' own thoughts on the issues.

Chapters three and four demand more

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theological acumen from the reader than the earlier chapters. Chapter three, "Trinity Talk in the Last Half of the Twentieth Century," is arranged according to theologians beginning with a "forecast" by Claude Welch. Welch's forecast concerned the theological storms welling up from Barth's claim that the future of Christianity is bound to the future of the trinitarian dogma. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had precipitated a deep dogmatic drought regarding the trinity. Peters chronicles the "fat" years since the Barthian downpour. Included on the tour are

theological mansions belonging to Eberhard Jüngel, Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann, Leonardo Boff, selected process theologians, Catherine Mowry LaCugna (a rising star that readers ought not miss), Robert Jenson, and Wolfhart Pannenberg.

Peters describes how each theologian draws from trinitarian thinking to address the God-world question. Two features of the question become critical: the link between time and eternity, and the connection of personhood with relationality. At times Peters gives his own assessment of particular thinkers. For instance, despite some helpful insights, process theology by and large represents “a detour away from the main direction of trinitarian discourse” consisting of “crude attempts at making the biblical symbols fit into already established metaphysical categories” (114, 115). At other times, for instance, with reference to Jenson and Pannenberg, one hopes for his critical perspective but receives little. In particular, how can the theology of the cross thrive so robustly in Jüngel’s and Moltmann’s trinitarian thinking but - languish so feebly in Jenson’s and Pannenberg’s?

Peters’s intends chapter four, “The Temporal and Eternal Trinity,” to be his own constructive contribution. He ventures an eschatological resolution to the eternity-time paradox. He offers a “modest” “theology on the way toward further constructive development.” As he does he draws on his own extensive background of dialogue with contemporary physics. Here Peters converses with Albert Einstein about relativity theory, with Ilya Prigogine about chaos and the laws of thermodynamics, and with Stephen Hawking about quantum mechanics. He ends with six trinitarian theses of his own which, not unexpectedly, resemble the Pannenbergian profile that has typified Peters’ past contributions. Furthermore, his theses precipitate a host of unanswered though interesting and important questions. Just what one expects and hopes for from *fides quaerens intellectum*.

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**A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON POLITICAL THOUGHT**, by Steven Charles Mott. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Pp. 338. \$55.00.

Professor Mott of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary has written a busy thirteen-chapter essay of small print and narrow margins, accompanied by seventy pages of endnotes. By the time I got to the end, I was not sure I could tell the forest from the trees. Mott takes up classic political questions such as power, ideology, justice, democracy, and the dynamics of political factions. He surveys conservatism, liberalism, and socialism. He aspires to political philosophy, but with the exception of Karl Marx, to whom he devotes a chapter, many of the great thinkers of modern politics are treated in sketchy fashion. Edmund Burke, Adam Smith, and John S. Mill are given generalized descriptions; Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke are barely mentioned; Baruch Spinoza, who wrote the first philosophical defense of modern democracy, and Rousseau, who is central in the development of continental socialism, are virtually ignored. The inadequate treatment of these profound figures (Allan Bloom once called them “Columbuses of the mind”) is not simply an oversight of bibliography. It lessens the quality and depth of argument. Mott’s essay does not rise above a conventional, even amateur level.

The key political question of western modernity is how to shape a democratic regime justly. This question is given classic

expression in the debate between John Locke, spokesman for the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, intellectual prophet of the French Revolution of 1789. In defending the English Revolution, Locke asserted that governing authorities must assume the *maturity* of the citizenry to shape its own life through private and voluntary associations such as family and church. Justice for the citizenry demands that people have the right to shape their lives in accordance with inherited traditions of a nation. The primary role of government is to protect this right and preserve the healthy customs of society. Government must be constitutional. Locke was a “Whig” or liberal in his viewpoint. One of his English successors in thought, Edmund Burke, was a “Tory” or conservative. Both shared allegiance to the Glorious Revolution that enshrined this basic understanding of the liberties of a mature citizenry protected by law. Both philosophers realized that society cannot be manipulated by the demands of reason exercised by an intellectual elite. To believe in such an elite is the first step toward fanaticism and tyranny. Political philosophy is obligated to operate within the givens of human nature and inherited practice. Montesquieu, David Hume, and Adam Smith followed in this tradition of modern political philosophy. In America, James Madison, the architect of the Constitution, was its greatest student.

By contrast, Rousseau understood society as transcending the abilities and rights of individual citizens. He assumed that the citizenry is made up of *immature children* to be shaped by the needs of the state. Private associations are dangerous because they infringe upon the “community” of the nation as a whole which has a “general will” articulated by an intellectual, governing elite. “Justice” is a function of communal needs of this general will to which individuals and private groups, the latter including religion, must be subject. This tradition of continental thinking affirms political philosophy as an enterprise in social engineering. Karl Marx is the most famous exponent of the tradition that begins in Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

The debate between Locke and his children (the Anglo-Scottish-American tradition) and Rousseau and his children (the continental tradition) is the “forest” that any responsible commentator on politics must understand before engaging in reflection. This includes Christian commentators since Christianity has been pressed into service by both sides of this debate. The Glorious Revolution was, in part, a reaction against the Puritan Commonwealth of Oliver Cromwell. But religious sectarians generally benefitted from the religious freedom they won in 1688. In America, disestablishment allowed Christian denominations of all stripes to flourish. Continental socialism was usually the enemy of the Christian church but this has never prevented theologians from identifying the socialist ideal with Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom of God. So, for example, Paul Tillich defended Stalin’s blockade of Berlin in 1948 as the preservation of the socialist ideal, and Karl Barth excused the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956 on the same grounds. Theological talent is no guarantee of political wisdom.

The chief way Mott exercises his “Christian perspective” in his book is to do word studies of concepts we perceive as politically important. “Power,” “justice,” “democracy,” etc., are analyzed “biblically” by citing an amalgam of verses and passages taken from both Testaments. The tendency is to make of the Bible an answer book for contemporary questions while ignoring the original contexts faced in biblical epochs.

Mott’s political observations leave much to be desired. For example, he readily draws upon the tired defense of Marx as a “biblical prophet,” ignoring Marx’s virulent anti-Semitism



and discounting his hatred of Christianity. He also fails entirely to mention Vladimir Lenin, Marx's most important historical interpreter. In his analysis of traditional conservatism (chapter 8), he underplays the centrality of explicit Christian ideas in the figures he surveys. (Is he embarrassed?)

Even when he turns to nitty-gritty matters of contemporary policy, Mott fails to deliver in any meaningful way. He suggests offhandedly that progressive tax policies may be threatened by the perception of how the wealthy will act rather than the

reality of their reaction. His citation for this generalization is a quotation from an economist in a newspaper article in *The Boston Globe*. There are extended studies of this complex question: the perusal of the morning paper is no substitute for serious research.

For much less cost, the reader interested in the question of a Christian perspective on politics can learn about the enduring political questions of the day by investing in a wonderful series put out by the University of Minnesota Press entitled "Concepts in Social Thought." This series includes: John Gray, *Liberalism*, David McLellan, *Ideology*, and Robert Nisbet, *Conservatism*. For a Christian perspective, take down Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man* from your shelves and reread it; or try a recent book: Glenn Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity*. Whether you identify yourself as liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, you will learn much that will serve you in parish teaching and the pulpit.

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**AIDS AND THE CHURCH: THE SECOND DECADE**, by Earl E. Shelp and Ronald H. Sunderland. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992. Pp. 240. \$11.99 (paper).

As someone who has lost more than 150 friends to AIDS, I approached this book with reservations. What would a couple of pastoral care specialists working in the Great Plains know of the "real" pain and suffering faced by those with HIV/AIDS and those of us who survive? Could the authors see the human tragedies constantly unfolding with this epidemic or would this be a chance to rationalize the inaction of the church? Would the Houston and Minneapolis experience have anything in common with the San Francisco experience where very few lives have not been touched by this disease?

Shelp and Sunderland are quick to point out that "verbal confessions of love for a neighbor touched by AIDS have not tended to become acts of love for that same neighbor" (29). The inaction of the church during the first decade of the HIV/AIDS epidemic is noted, but this is not a book about beating up the church for missed opportunities for ministry, it is a book that can prepare us for ministry with persons with HIV/AIDS before the task becomes completely overwhelming.

The authors note that one of the primary ways in which the early church distinguished itself from the rest of society was in its compassion for the sick and care for the dying. As Jesus had cured lepers, early Christians considered it their sacred duty to follow this example and minister to the suffering of the sick. With the advent of modern medicine, churches continued the tradition with their own hospitals. Yet in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, individual

Christians began to view ministering to the sick as the job of health care professionals.

Early Christians also rejected the view that regarded the sick as responsible for their own illness. “Rabbi, who has sinned, this man or his parents? Why was he born blind?” Jesus responded: “It is not that this man or his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s power might be displayed in curing him” (John 9:2-33). Yet Shelp and Sunderland point out that:

For the past 150 years in the United States, negative religious and moral attitudes have been a characteristic part of the social response to infectious diseases and the people who suffer them. (16)

During the epidemic of 1832, cholera was said to be a disease of the sinful. “Respectable” people had little to worry about. We have come a long way from that kind of thinking. We do not hold moral judgments against people who have emphysema, Parkinson’s Disease, or breast cancer. However, when it comes to a disease like AIDS, which can be transmitted sexually or by needles (assumed drug abuse), as a society we jump on our moral high horse and blame the sinners for their disease—a very un-Christian view of the sick. How HIV/AIDS is contracted is irrelevant. What is important are the needs of the sick.

Shelp and Sunderland explain the nature of the HIV virus and the medical de-

velopments that lead to an AIDS diagnosis. The clear and concise way in which this information is presented helps clarify a complex subject to both one who has lived through several AIDS deaths and someone just beginning to learn about the subject. Though not a medical text, the chapter on “Clinical and Psychological Effects of HIV/AIDS” is written in a way that is both understandable and complete.

A person considering how to respond to this crisis is given a realistic look at the considerable difficulties, as well as the numerous opportunities for ministry. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s pioneering work with the terminally ill brought to light the need for a willingness to listen to the sick as well as identifying the stages of dying. When one considers the additional issues that most persons with HIV/AIDS are: 1) relatively young; 2) losing control of their bodies and watching them deteriorate; and 3) taking medications that are sometimes as toxic as the disease itself, the challenge can seem completely overwhelming.

What of our own prejudices with such a ministry? Someone who is out to convince AIDS sinners to change their ways will not last long. However, those who are open to coming face to face with God in another human being will meet people and have experiences that will change their understanding of the gospel. Ministry with persons living on the margins of society always challenges our own prejudices and beliefs, but we must remember that God works through the lives of marginalized people.

What will our friends say when we begin to work with gay people or drug addicts? Are we willing to be aligned with or stigmatized by association with those marginalized populations? Are we willing to be ostracized, as Jesus was, for associating with outcast groups? Eating with tax collectors and sinners would raise far fewer eyebrows today than walking down the street with a person with visible lesions from Kaposi’s Sarcoma.

Not all are called to ministries of emotional support and hospital care, though many lay

people have great skills in this area and should be encouraged and appropriately trained. Because a person with HIV/AIDS is debilitated by this disease, practical help is needed in the home. Who among us cannot vacuum a rug, change a bed, do laundry, buy groceries, deliver a hot meal, or give someone a ride to a medical appointment?

The need is great now and will only increase in the future. Where will the church be in this crisis—in the forefront of ministry where it belongs, or dragged kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century?

When reading the chapter on “The Global Impact of HIV/AIDS”, one cannot help being overwhelmed by the enormity of the problem on an international level. Only by serious remedial action *now* by organizations such as the United Nations, World Health Organization and the World Council of Churches can we hope to deal with the present problems as well as control the spread of HIV/AIDS in the future. The World Health Organization projects that by the year 2000, a minimum of 10 million infants and children will be infected with HIV and that the total number of people infected worldwide will reach 25 to 30 million! The number of reported AIDS cases among teenagers in the United States has increased by *96% in the past two years!*

The authors’ experience in Houston and Minneapolis, along with research in other urban areas, mirrors San Francisco, where numerous successful ministries with HIV/AIDS-affected persons exist. Most AIDS ministries have realized that in order to most effectively utilize scarce resources, ecumenical cooperation (often on a regional basis) is necessary to avoid duplication of effort and burnout of volunteers. As the effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic spread from urban areas to suburban and rural parts of the country, one must ask, “What can I/we do now and in the future to minister with those individuals and families suffering from the effects of HIV/AIDS?” Read this book. Determine what you can do on an individual, parish, and ecumenical level. Be prepared for the joy, pain, and grace given to those who join in ministry with the children of God the church forgot.

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