

Reviews



FROM EVE TO ESTHER: RABBINIC RECONSTRUCTIONS OF BIBLICAL WOMEN, by Leila Leah Bronner. Pp. 214.

HELPMATES, HARLOTS, AND HEROES: WOMEN'S STORIES IN THE HEBREW BIBLE, by Alice Ogden Bellis. Pp. 281.

CLOTHED WITH THE SUN: BIBLICAL WOMEN, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND US, by Joyce Hollyday. Pp. 241.

All three: Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994.

Leila Bronner's analysis of Rabbinic views on biblical women is a fascinating addition to existing studies of women in Scripture. *From Eve to Esther* sets out to show the power both Bible and Midrash have had on women's roles and status for generations. Bronner focuses systematically

on the ambivalence of Rabbinic attitudes: upholding modesty as a virtue, yet exhibiting a certain tenderness and sympathy toward bad women; constraining to keep women within home and hearth, yet displaying occasional pride in women as significant leaders of the community. (xi)

She intends to present a balanced picture, recognizing the multivalence of biblical texts and the social preoccupations of the sages interpreting them.

Midrashic analysis typically focuses on difficult words, inner contradictions, and problematical passages in the text. Much can be read into a text (eisegesis) through this sort of interpretation. (xv)

The stories of Rahab and Tamar illustrate this. The rabbis do not condemn them, but "rehabilitate them so thoroughly through midrashic exegesis that both women are transformed into exceptional figures" (148).

Etymology was important to such interpretation since names were thought to be symbols, a key to the nature of personality. Thus Rabbinic tradition attributes arrogance to Deborah and Huldah, calling their

names hateful, the former called a hornet, *ziborata*, the latter a weasel, *kurkushta*.

By imposing a scale of values on biblical heroines they "endeared the characters of the Bible to folk of their own times...(and conveyed) the values they wanted to spread throughout the community" (3). The rabbis placed a high value on beauty and modesty. Midrashic tradition praises Ruth for her *chesed* (loving-kindness); beauty and modesty are ascribed to her, even though these qualities are not mentioned in the biblical text.

While women are not "models of prayer in the Rabbinic community, Hannah becomes the prototype for excellence in prayer" (xix). The communal prayer experience, a central activity in biblical and Rabbinic Judaism, was closed to women who were encouraged to pray in private, yet the prayer attributed to Hannah is recorded in the Bible.

In the end Bronner calls for "further studies in the emerging tradition of depatriarchalizing interpretation," that we might "reclaim biblical women with our own midrash and reinstate them as paradigms for our modern lives" (186).

Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes is a scholarly survey of feminist and womanist interpretations of women of the Hebrew Bible. Designed for courses Alice Bellis teaches at Howard University School of Divinity, the material is arranged for religious education classes in churches and synagogues as well. Provocative discussion questions, extensive bibliographies, and notes follow each chapter, and helpful indices to scripture, biblical women, and authors cited make this a comprehensive reference. It begs to be read and studied with a group.

By way of introduction, she defines terms, provides background to women's status in Israel's history, and outlines methods of interpretation and approaches to scriptural authority, all in a very thorough-going manner. Women's stories, so powerful "they have profoundly affected women's self-understanding and men's perception of women" (3), are given new readings by well-known feminist scholars

from varying backgrounds: Northern European, Afro-American, Asian, and American. Bellis brings her own conclusions to bear on their commentaries.

The first chapter is devoted to the story of Eve, "used more than any other as a theological base for sexism" (45). In the succeeding chapters one discovers: biblical women were women of color—"they sometimes fared better in the hands of biblical narrators than of modern interpreters" (30); women were cruel and tender, powerless and powerful, devious and devout, revered and brutally victimized. If one cannot match a biblical woman to each of these descriptions, it is time to read Bellis' book!

While "there is not always a single feminist reading of a biblical woman's story" (234), Bellis insists on a close reading of the text using traditional technical tools in order that we see how "past history and the ancients' thoughts interact with, shape, and challenge our contemporary views" (238).

I wondered, as I read, about our children. How can we honestly represent Bible women, drawn from such multivalent texts, in ways that will enrich their understanding of God's plan for the world, then and now?

The title of *Clothed with the Sun* describes the portent in Revelation 12, a powerful woman who was not threatened by the dragon and his angels but taken into the wilderness where she was nourished by God. Joyce Hollyday claims this symbol of the church as a metaphor for contemporary women in her nourishing book, subtitled *Biblical Women, Social Justice and Us*. Arranged as fifty meditations to be used by individuals or groups, women of the Bible are grouped according to types, e.g., "devoted mothers," "women touched by Jesus," or "witnesses to life and resurrection." Reflection questions follow each group.

Stories from the Old and New Testaments are vividly retold and carefully interpreted to make the characters live again in the reader's experience. Each is paired with modern examples "who courageously defy wrongful authority and band together to demand justice and uphold life" (xii). The writer makes connections between Rahab and the El Salvador martyrs,

Michal and Harriet Tubman, Deborah and Hildegard of Bingen, Priscilla and Catherine Booth, considered by one biographer to have "laid the first stone of the Salvation Army" (162).

In this meditation she writes, "God has not been satisfied to carry on the work of faith with only half of the available servants." It seems to me this is reason enough for both men and women to learn more about women in scripture, to find our role models there, and to claim our vocations boldly. Westminster John Knox Press is to be commended for publishing these stimulating volumes.

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A HISTORY OF ISRAELITE RELIGION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT PERIOD,

by Rainer Albertz. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994. Pp. 740, in 2 vols.: vol. I, *From the Beginnings to the End of the Monarchy*; vol. II, *From the Exile to the Maccabees*.

As a student in Heidelberg, Rainer Albertz learned from Gerhard von Rad and did a doctoral degree under Claus Westermann. In these volumes, however, unlike his teachers, he chooses *not* to write a theology of the Old Testament. Instead, he returns to the genre of the late nineteenth century, before the advent of the great Old Testament theologies of recent generations, producing "a history of Israelite religion."

Albertz certainly means no disrespect to his teachers, nor does he simply dismiss their scholarship. His own history could not have been written before their work. Still, for a variety of reasons, primarily his insistence on the historical structure of the Old Testament and the essential connection between religious statements and the historical background from which they derive, he finds a history, not a theology, to be the proper focus of his efforts (1:16-17).

Contemporary American theological students and pastors may be surprised that anyone would still attempt such an approach. What they have heard now for a decade or two is that (1) there is no way to reconstruct biblical history and (2) it

wouldn't make any difference if you could, since what matters is the literature itself and the reader's response to it, not its author or background. Admittedly, we have learned much from a literary approach to scripture, and most of its advocates would not make these anti-historical statements quite so baldly (though some would), but the two points nevertheless represent what many students *hear* in quick methodological overviews.

The chief value of Albertz's work, therefore, is its simple audacity in attempting once again to reconstruct history. He recognizes the problems, asking himself whether, given the level of dispute "over the literary place and date of many areas of the Old Testament, such a work of synthesis makes any sense at all today" (I:viii). But he thinks the attempt is necessary. And he is right. Of course, we cannot simply get at or reconstruct "what really happened" in the ancient world in some direct and uninterpreted way. But neither will it be sufficient to say that "nothing ever happened (or we don't know what happened), but here's what it means." Human honesty and intellectual curiosity demand that we continue to do our collective best to learn as much as possible — recognizing, to be sure, the tentative nature of all such reconstructive work. Maybe even more important for pastors and theologians: a confessional tradition that insists on God's entry into history can never give up trying to understand history. Everything, literally everything, is at stake. Albertz is to be commended for leaving the safer harbor of literary work and venturing anew into the stormy and dangerous seas of history.

Although Albertz's work is complex, it is not inaccessible to the diligent and careful reader. (The translation by John Bowden flows particularly well.) It is not necessary, or even intended, that one read the volumes from cover to cover. They lend themselves to selective perusal, as the questions and interest of the reader dictate. The extensive bibliographical notes at the beginning of each section pave the way to further investigation for those so inclined. I have used portions of these books in the seminary classroom to great benefit. Students often have very little sense of ancient history in general or biblical history in par-

ticular, so this work fills an important void. Additionally, its admittedly controversial developmental approach to the growth of Israel's religion (including, for example, the rather important notion of monotheism!) often forces readers to think in new ways and entertain new ideas. Even if virtually any scholar will disagree here or there (for some, it may be often) with Albertz's particular reconstructions or methodology, the volumes provide a stimulating and critical portrayal of the broad sweep of Israel's religious history — a history which any student or pastor must somewhere contemplate if she or he is not content simply to divorce the biblical "story" from the contingencies of world history.

An important dimension of Albertz's history is its attempt to bridge the divisions produced by the increasingly specialized disciplines of recent biblical and theological study. Here Albertz explicitly follows the clarion call of Claus Westermann (see, e.g., Westermann's proposals in *Word & World* 13/4 [1993] 342-344). Thus, the book brings together political and social history, literary study and comparative religion, archaeology and theology in its presentation of Israel's religious history. One significant and insightful result, an area pursued by Albertz throughout his career, is the attempt to penetrate Israel's "internal religious pluralism" and to define three levels of religion in the Old Testament period: official, local, and familial. Contemporary studies make us well aware of the differences in our own time between a church's official theology and what people actually believe and practice. Albertz attempts to get at similar differences in the Old Testament. This is not merely of abstract interest. Erhard Gerstenberger, for example, uses Albertz's work to good advantage in his investigation of the place of women in Israel's religion (*Jahwe — ein patriarchaler Gott?*, forthcoming in English from Fortress [1996?]).

Scholars will continue the debate about methodology, the relation between history and theology, or the possibility and value of historical reconstruction. In the meantime, readers of this journal who delve into Albertz's history will find it provocative and helpful as they do their daily work of

understanding the biblical message for themselves and presenting it to their parishioners or students.

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MAJESTY AND MEEKNESS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CONTRAST AND HARMONY IN THE CONCEPT OF GOD, by John B. Carman. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994. Pp. 453.

When a blurb for this book says that it is “the outstanding example to date of the emerging genre of world theology – that is, theology in a religious tradition written in reference to the theologies of other world religious traditions,” it is, surprisingly, correct. We are swiftly leaving the day behind when we can treat other religious communities, their beliefs and teachings, with benign neglect. Whether it be the neighbor down the street, in the next town, or on our TV screen, or the courses our youth take in college and university (and increasingly in high schools as well), or the books and magazines we read, reckoning with these other commitments is becoming a part of our daily lives. Neither can the pondering of our own Christian faith be done as though we lived in an isolated space. What Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists believe, not to mention many others, can affect significantly how we do our own theology, and so also our practice of ministry.

Carman, in my judgment, is superb in the way he enables Christians who really believe what they confess to think through their faith in relationship to the commitments of people of other faiths. He has spent a lifetime in the study of one stream of the Hindu faith. Though he does not wear his own faith on his sleeve, it clearly shows through the pages of the book. I have long wondered why Carman does not use his great knowledge to bring Hindu beliefs into creative engagement with the Christian faith. He is, however, much more patient than I am. This book represents what I shall call his second phase. He has a sense of honorable commitment to “objec-

tive” scholarship (he calls it phenomenology) and will move only with the greatest of caution from descriptive to normative issues. This book begins the move – bringing descriptive and theological concerns into contact with each other. I envision a third phase, in which he begins a full-blown theological reconstruction of some aspects of the Christian faith in the light of his previous work.

Several things please me about the book. He describes selected Hindu beliefs clearly and well, and in a way that shows they invite connection with some basic Christian beliefs. He expands this conversation to include Buddhist, Jewish, and Muslim convictions about related matters, and does so competently. He gets to the heart of trinitarian issues. In my opinion, if one converses about other faiths and fails to come to terms with the trinitarian issue, one has simply missed the boat theologically. Furthermore, he doesn’t adhere to any pop approach to other faith commitments, whether it be the exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist. Since he takes incarnation and trinity seriously he is far from such pluralist advocates as Hick and Knitter. He takes the faith he confesses seriously and the faith commitments of others seriously, and patiently works at fundamental issues.

What then is the book about? Carman has had a lifelong scholarly love affair with the idea of contrast (polarity) in the very notion of God. This is the key that he turns in many directions to open doors of theological reflection. He happened upon the importance of contrast in the understanding of God during his study of the Indian theologian Ramanuja. He discovered here a strong sense of both the supremacy and accessibility of God to the pious believer in Vishnu (Krishna). How could the one who was supreme ruler of the universe at the same time be accessible to poor mortals? Ramanuja gives theological coherence to the profound piety of the devotees of Vishnu.

Of course, it didn’t take long to see that the same kind of polarity is at the heart of the Christian faith. How can the one who is seen by none be available in a Bethlehem stall? The Hindu answer to their form of the question is both disturbingly close to the

Christian answer while also surprisingly far. From this Carman discovers a rich set of polarities in almost all understandings of God, and uses this encounter with Hinduism to explore them.

What does he mean by polarity? There are many kinds of polarities, and many ways to deal with them. There is wrath and love, justice and mercy, transcendence and immanence, supremacy and accessibility, self-sufficiency and dependence, personal and transpersonal, masculine and feminine, good and evil, maintenance and destruction, one and many – the list could go on. One can deal with these polarities either by transcending them through appeal to a higher truth, by rejecting one or the other pole, by arranging them hierarchically, by making them into paradox or a way of speech about the unspeakable, and so on. His bias theologically, however others may deal with it, is to see polarities in terms of two contrasting qualities which still belong together in an irreducible way. It is this last insistence of his that makes his discussion of trinitarian matters towards the end of the book particularly fruitful if still only starting that exploration.

He discusses a variety of Hindu perspectives, though his major treatment is of the tradition of devotion to Vishnu. (I refrain from using technical terms in this review.) He deals first with one of their great hymn writers (ca. 9th C.E.), then with their greatest theologian Ramanuja (ca. late 11th-early 12th C.E.), and finally with one of this tradition's greatest commentators (ca. 12th C.E.). Carman will later get us into polarity in the Christian understanding of God by first taking us to the Christian hymnbook, and then exploring Luther and Jonathan Edwards. In the course of his discussion he will also treat such things as grace and faith in the Buddhist context as well as the Hindu, the difference between avatar and incarnation, Jewish and Muslim experience of God, mysticism, Hindu goddesses, some contemporary examples of a Christian theology of polarities (including Bonaventure [not so modern], Tillich, Barth, Hartshorne, and Hendrikus Berkhof), and of course trinitarian theology itself. The title of the book, "Majesty and Meekness," comes from Jonathan Ed-

wards' narrative of his own experience of God:

I walked abroad alone....And as I was walking there, and looking up on the sky and clouds, there came into my mind so sweet a sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God, that I know not how to express....Majesty and meekness joined together; it was a sweet and gentle, and holy majesty; and also a majestic meekness; an awful sweetness; a high, and great, and holy gentleness. (426)

Of what use is such a book for the parish pastor? It can have several benefits. It can quicken one's sensitivity to the convictions of others. Indeed, in reading his presentation of Hindu beliefs, as well as others, one will find reason for sensitivity to the faiths of others as one discovers convictions that a Christian shares, even if somewhat differently. One will, moreover, be able to speak sensibly about the faith of others on truly reliable authority. Certain crucial differences will be highlighted. This will invite a variety of reflections upon various important aspects of the Christian faith, perhaps seeing these in a new light. His review of the insights of several theologians, including Luther, will show their similarities and differences with each other in a very crucial area of the doctrine of God. His preliminary discussion of trinitarian questions in this context will invite the reader's own self-clarification. Finally, it will dispose one to be dissatisfied with any cheapshot approaches to other faiths, yet will not encourage in the serious reader the marketplace notion that one faith is as good as another and that there is no need to proclaim the gospel except to ourselves.

Now, this book is not quick reading. It rewards the patient reader who is serious about her or his understanding of God in our increasingly plural environment and what this understanding means for addressing our human condition.

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Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph, by Ben Witherington, III. Westminster John Knox Press, 1994. Pp. 355.

In this book Witherington attempts to examine the whole of Paul's thought world. Rather than building an artificial topical framework for organizing the Pauline material, he tries to construct a truly Pauline context for organizing it, one that is narrative based. He speaks of Paul's narrative thought world because he is convinced that all of Paul's context-specific discourse ultimately arises out of his reflections on a grand story. This large drama is comprised of four interrelated stories: (1) the story of the entire cosmos gone awry in Adam; (2) the story of Israel in that world; (3) the central and climactic story of Christ which arises out of both 1 and 2 above and the story of God as creator and redeemer; and (4) the story of Christians, which arises out of all three of these stories and promises a world set right again. In the bulk of the book Witherington moves back and forth between the exegetical details and this larger story, showing both how Paul's discourse is generated by this larger story and how these details cohere and gel into this large drama.

Although he makes use of information describing Paul's social world and mentions the importance of rhetorical strategy, this is definitely a *theology* book arguing for the coherence of Paul's thought within a narrative framework. It covers most of what one might expect in a treatment of Paul's theology and will help the pastor remain abreast of the current discussion. In dialogue with other Pauline scholars, Witherington provides interesting exegetical discussions throughout (e.g., that the subject in Rom 7:7-13 is Adam and then in 7:14-25 those who are "in Adam"). Although some of his conclusions present a challenge to Lutherans (e.g., his treatment of progressive sanctification, the *Imitatio Christi* as important for Pauline ethics, or his denial of the *simul*), a careful reading of the book will repay the reader with new insights into the shape of Pauline theology. The book contains interesting and accessible prose, good periodic summaries, and a helpful scripture index. Overall, it will be

useful for pastors and teachers and deserves a wide readership.

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God with Us: A Pastoral Theology of Matthew's Gospel, by Mark Allan Powell. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995. Pp. 156.

Although there are many new approaches to the study of the Synoptic Gospels, such as literary and rhetorical analyses, the interest in the theological analysis and interpretation of them has not subsided. The author of this work has shown in earlier works that he is highly skilled in literary studies of the Gospel of Matthew, and now he demonstrates in this book more explicitly than earlier his gift at providing a theological interpretation of it.

But how does one go about giving a theological interpretation of a gospel? The usual way has been to probe a gospel in light of the various loci of systematic theology (christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, etc.). But here the author takes a different approach, using what he calls the "categories related to pastoral theology." There are five that are explored: mission, worship, teaching, stewardship, and social justice.

The book is based on lectures given at various pastoral conferences and is therefore addressed to a wide audience in the church. At the same time, each chapter is carefully focused on the text of Matthew, and in footnotes the footprints of the author through contemporary scholarship are evident.

Regarding mission, the author contends that the evangelist regards the mission of the church as a continuation of what God has begun to accomplish in the mission of Jesus on earth (3). In the chapter on worship Powell picks up and demonstrates how thoroughly the language of worship pervades this gospel. The chapter on teaching explores basic questions regarding it (What is taught? Who does it? To whom is teaching given?). The chapter on stewardship is a skillful exposition of three parables (21:33-43; 24:45-51; 25:14-30). The final

chapter explores a theme very much neglected. The author demonstrates that the Beatitudes are not a mere "catalog of virtues" (128) but are very much related to social justice. Thorough exposition of the Beatitudes along these lines is one of the strongest parts of the book.

Other topics in "pastoral theology" could have been explored beyond these (sin, forgiveness, healing, proclamation, and so forth), but what the author provides here is fresh, lucid, and helpful for pastoral reflection on a gospel that, in many ways, appears to be a manual for pastoral theology and care.

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With One Voice: A Lutheran Resource for Worship. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995. Pp. 288.

In an era of widespread worship experimentation, there comes a much needed and anticipated book that provides Lutheran (and other) congregations resources for addressing issues of contemporaneity and multi-culturalism in worship. *With One Voice* is a worship supplement that has been designed to stand alongside existing worship resources. It is intended to be used by congregations who, within the framework of traditional liturgical patterns, seek alternative music and modern language for worship.

In the short space of 288 pages, this supplement provides a useful array of liturgical settings, service music, hymns, and songs. There are two newly commissioned settings of the Holy Communion based on liturgical texts from the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. Setting 4 (so named to distinguish it from settings 1-3 in the *LBW*) offers singable music written in a variety of styles. Setting 5 is noteworthy for the simplicity of its melodies. There is a sixth setting, which may prove to be the most interesting and useful of the three. It is a setting of the communion liturgy which follows the form of Luther's Chorale Mass. For each liturgical element of this service, several hymn or service music options are suggested. There is a corresponding section of service music

that offers selections from settings by various modern composers including Marty Haugen, Jay Beech, Michael Hassell, and Jacques Berthier, as well as some lively options from the world church. In addition to the three settings of Holy Communion, there is included a new "Service of the Word and Prayer" based on scriptural texts and incorporating three new liturgical songs.

The main body of the book is its hymn section which presents 201 hymns and songs for worship use. Among the noteworthy contemporary authors and composers represented are Carl Schalk, Jaroslav Vajda, John Ylvisaker, Gracia Grindal, and Brian Wren. There are also numerous hymns from the rich tradition of Christian hymnody, including tunes by Mozart, Schubert, Vaughan Williams, Distler, Praetorius, and two chorale harmonizations by J. S. Bach. The supplement achieves a rich diversity through its inclusion of numerous folk-songs from various cultures and global faith communities. Represented are songs from the traditions of Africa, the Caribbean, Russia, Central America, Israel, and many European countries, as well as Native American and African American songs. The collection is well selected and will constitute a useful canon of hymns for congregations who seek a fresh voice for their traditional patterns of worship.

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Transforming Congregations for the Future, by Loren B. Mead. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1994. Pp. 139.

Transforming Congregations is the third book in the Alban Institute's *Once and Future Church Series* written by Loren Mead. In *The Once and Future Church*, the first and most widely-read book of the series, Mead broadly surveys past and present changes in the church and considers a future to which those changes might be pointing. According to Mead, in this post-Christendom era old assumptions

don't work and institutions are breaking down. Denominations, structured to do mission in far-off lands or national crises now encounter "mission fields" at their churches' front doors or in the workplaces and families of their members.

In *More Than Numbers*, his second book of the series, Mead explores the challenges and complexities of congregational health using a grid "measuring" numerical, maturational, organic, and incarnational growth. He challenges congregations to develop their own "mix" of these four types of growth as their vision or goal for ministry.

Transforming Congregations is Mead's "vision" of the church's reshaping itself for mission in the turmoil of today's changing world. After reasserting the seriousness of the complex changes which are dramatically affecting all churches, and arguing that no amount of cosmetic tinkering with programs is going to make any significant difference, Mead calls congregations to an age-old mission: living and breathing the good news promise of spiritual transformation for all to see.

If the church is to be faithful and effective, it must take up its apostolic task of proclaiming the Good News as Jesus did: in response to the world's experience of "bad news." Paraphrasing several key New Testament passages and citing Billy Graham and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as examples, Mead develops a four-quadrant model of wholistic evangelism. The quadrants include "secular" and "religious" responses to both individual and social "bad news."

Transformation-preparation of disciples and apostles is the goal of this wholistic model of evangelism. A faithful and effective congregation will become a gospel community of proclamation that teaches the tradition and serves others. As gospel communities, congregations will reflect the features Parker Palmer claims are characteristic of public life as it should be: strangers meet on common ground, fear of the stranger is tended, scarce resources are shared and abundance generated, conflict occurs and is resolved, etc.

Even as congregations become apostolic, gospel communities in mission, regional and national judicatories must

reconstruct themselves to service congregations in their task of making disciples and apostles. Mead finds nine critical functions for judicatories in his new vision of "regional, national, and international" church. He argues that for judicatories to become the "persistent friend" of congregations is a good place to start.

Congregational and judicatory leaders, both lay and clergy, will find much provocative, imaginative material in Mead's proposal. All three books in this series might well become evocative beginnings to church leadership discussions and planning processes. The work is accessible, sound, and engaging. It raises critical issues and points in effective and faithful directions.

For many who have found Mead's analysis of the challenges facing contemporary congregations particularly insightful and have been awaiting an equally imaginative proposal for an "emerging new paradigm" for the church, *Transforming Congregations* will be less than satisfying. While Mead's call for refocusing the church on its apostolic mission is important and clear, there is little in his proposal that pastors have not heard before. Moreover, his focus on shaping ministry around "bad news" could draw congregations into presenting to the world what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the "God of the gaps."

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