

# Reviews



**FIRST CORINTHIANS**, by Richard B. Hays. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997. Pp. 299. \$24.00.

Sexual ethics, sacramental practices, worship styles, the role of women in the church: no, this is not a series of resolution topics to be debated at the next annual meeting of your denominational judicatory. It is a partial list of questions the apostle Paul addresses in his first letter to the Corinthians. In his *Interpretation* commentary on this letter, Richard Hays takes up these and other issues raised in 1 Corinthians. Hays's work honors his audience's cultural and temporal distance from Paul's first readers and yet brings the letter to life as scripture for late-twentieth-century North American Christians.

Hays gets at the meaning of a text primarily by reading that text in relation to other literature that has shaped its composition and/or its subsequent hearings. Literature that helps us understand 1 Corinthians includes (1) Greco-Roman philosophy of the same period, (2) Paul's other letters, and (3) the Greek translation of Israel's scripture. Hays cites writers such as Epictetus and Musonius Rufus to demonstrate similarities between ancient philosophy and the Corinthians' slogans and to point out how Paul may be borrowing the philosophers' rhetorical tools and turning them to his own advantage. Pauline parallels help in the tasks of narrowing the semantic range of words that are difficult to translate and filling in theological detail that 1 Corinthians, with its emphasis on a series of pastoral concerns, does not offer. Paul's use of the Septuagint receives special attention in this commentary. Hays identifies Paul as a "hermeneutic theologian," who makes sense of the Corinthians' situation by arguing from Israel's scriptures for a vision of what the

God of Israel is accomplishing among them. Paul envisions the diverse, fractious, and predominately gentile Corinthians being formed into a community whose life together both takes its shape from and offers witness to the promised new age that Israel's God has assured by raising Jesus from the dead and by giving the Holy Spirit to the church.

Hays offers exegetical comment on each section of the letter. Larger blocks of commentary conclude with a section titled, "Reflections for Teachers and Preachers," that goes beyond summarizing the main points of the preceding exegesis to imagining what the common life of a church shaped by this letter's proclamation of the gospel would look like in the midst of twentieth-century western culture. In the reflections, Hays encourages teachers and preachers in specific strategies for our own communities' "conversion of the imagination" modeled on that conversion Paul was attempting to bring about in his first readers. Hays believes that scripture rings most compellingly true as it is lived, and so throughout this commentary he offers imaginative constructs of what it would mean for modern Christians to enact faithful readings of this letter.

A sketch of Hays's assessment of the character of the churches at Corinth suggests a number of points of contact between the "strong" at Corinth and middle class Americans. The Corinthians are confusing Stoic values such as individual autonomy with the freedom of the gospel. They are bombarded on every side by the icons of non-Christian culture, and have to make choices about what features of that culture they can participate in without compromising the Christian identity and character of their community of faith, an identity and

character that are themselves still in the process of being formed. They have an inadequate understanding of themselves as participating in an ongoing narrative of salvation that connects them to each other, to Israel, and to members of other churches.

Paul reminds the Corinthians in this situation that he determined to know nothing among them "except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). He goes on to offer values to guide decision making which are based on the cross as (1) an eschatological sign of the new age that God is ushering in, and (2) an example of self-giving love which the Corinthians should follow in their dealings with each other. Hays suggests ways that modern Christians can bear witness to both of these understandings of the cross. His work on 1 Corinthians 15 is especially useful for demonstrating how Paul's eschatology can shape our current witness; his remarks on 1 Corinthians 8-10 provide a clear example of an ethic that takes Christ's self-giving love as a model for Christian behavior.

As all preachers must, Hays has made some judgments about who his audience is and what they need to hear. Hays's appropriations of the letter are generally aimed at Christians who are individualistic, privileged, defined largely by the dominant (non-Christian) culture, and more or less uncomfortable with other Christians who do not share their socio-economic profile. In short, Hays puts the imagined addressees of sermons based on the insights of this commentary in the place of the strong at Corinth. The only problem with this is the problem that preachers always have: Will the strong hear the sermon and repent, or will only the weak take it to heart, believing that scripture's call to self-giving love means that the boot at the back of their necks is ordained by God? The preacher will do well to remember that Paul was not just afflicting the comfortable at Corinth. He was calling both those who were comfortable in the old age and those who were not to recognize that a new age, which would re-

configure all their relationships, was breaking in.

Readers of this commentary should not be misled by the absence of footnotes, indexes, and extensive bibliography. The *Interpretation* series requires a stream-lined presentation, but there is nothing off-the-cuff about Hays's work. Those familiar with current research on 1 Corinthians will hear that work faithfully echoed throughout the commentary, and references to additional sources are mentioned in the text when space does not permit Hays to do more than sketch the broad outlines of an exegetical controversy. Hays has studied the Revised Common Lectionary's use of 1 Corinthians and suggests helpful adaptations to it at points. He also provides the reader with insights from the Greek text and evaluations of various English translations throughout the commentary.

This book is readable enough to double as an adult Bible study text. By reading from one "Reflections" section to the next each week, a group could study the whole letter in about five months. Although the commentary deals carefully with exegetical issues and offers homiletical direction for preachers, it does so in a way that will not make lay readers feel incompetent or bored. Instead, it will make lay readers as well as pastors feel a new appreciation for the communion they share with the saints at Corinth and renewed gratitude for the gift of a canon that includes 1 Corinthians.

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**THE TRINITY IN A PLURALISTIC AGE: THEOLOGICAL ESSAYS ON CULTURE AND RELIGION**, edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997. Pp. x + 166. \$20.00.

Origen described the traditional Christian response to the problem of the One and the Many in these words: "You will find that

wherever you encounter in Scripture terms like plurality, chasm, division, dissonance or the like, they are evaluated as evil. Where you meet unity and unanimity, however, such terms are synonymous with goodness." In our time this evaluation has been reversed. For many of our contemporaries, the One has lost its potency and its unequivocal association with the Good, and the Many is affirmed in the form of deviance, gaps, and radical alterity. Pluralism is no longer associated, as it was for Origen, with corruption or judged negatively from the perspective of unity and perfection. Today, it is recognized as a basic human need, and the One is dismissed as being illusory and even immoral. As all Christians are aware, there is a need in the contemporary world to address the problem of pluralism in all its guises, and to reflect on what the universalism of the gospel means in a context in which all universals are suspected of hegemonic presumption and "violent" suppression of differences. In these circumstances, Christians are asked to choose between a universalism that carries little or no weight beyond the Christian community, and a postmodern relativism that undercuts the vitality and relevance of the Christian message.

But are these the only alternatives available to us? The essays in this volume attempt to carve out a third possible position by beginning with the Trinity as the distinctly Christian understanding of God. Kevin J. Vanhoozer describes the underlying assumption of each of these essays in this way:

Our working hypothesis is straightforward, but its implications are immense: the doctrine of the Trinity, with its dual emphasis on oneness and threeness as equally ultimate, contains unexpected and hitherto unexplored resources for dealing with the problems and possibilities of contemporary pluralism. (x)

Perhaps Christians, the authors in this collection suggest, are not called to give

their allegiance to either the One or the Many, but to follow a third path in which both are absorbed into the three-in-oneness of the triune God. The essays that comprise this volume examine this possibility from a variety of angles. Some look at the doctrine of the Trinity from a historical and theological perspective in order to clarify what it might mean for a theology of religions. Others search for vestiges of the Trinity in other religious traditions. Still others attempt to clarify the role of the Trinity in the theologies of Barth, Rahner, and Moltmann, in order to establish an agenda for the future.

Despite these differences in content, however, there are two themes running throughout these essays with which all the authors are concerned either implicitly or explicitly. The first of these is the identity of God. The encounter with pluralism immediately raises the question of what kind of God we are talking about. Leslie Newbigin, for example, in a piece entitled, "The Trinity as Public Truth," argues that the God referred to in the Christian tradition has often been "recognizable as a conflation of Aristotle's prime mover with the Allah of the Qur'an" (4), and that this "shadowy survival of a unitarian God" (5) has carried over into the present. This image of God, in his view, "tends to validate patterns of domination in human affairs," and is directly opposed to the trinitarian understanding of God "which provides us with an ontology of love to replace an ontology of violence" (6). A similar point is made in Richard Bauckham's examination of "Jürgen Moltmann and the Question of Pluralism," in which it is suggested that the Trinity reveals the meaning of the kingdom of God by defining God as "love rather than as lordship" (158). This position, while firmly rooted in the Christian tradition, emphasizes the priority of relationships and openness to others. Perhaps it is only by opening ourselves up to those who have different faiths and cultures that we are true to a Christian identity formed through reflection on the Trinity.

The second theme echoing throughout these pages is the question of the nature and goals of interreligious dialogue. This theme is explored at some length in Vanhoozer's contribution, "Does the Trinity Belong in a Theology of Religions? On Angling in the Rubicon and the 'Identity' of God." Vanhoozer observes that the Trinity is commonly considered an obstacle to meaningful dialogue with adherents of other faith traditions, but suggests that it is in fact the "transcendental condition for interreligious dialogue, the ontological condition that permits us to take the other in all seriousness, without fear and without violence" (71). Eliminate the Trinity, he maintains, and dialogue "lacks the necessary specificity (i.e., Logos, Christ) and the necessary spirit (i.e., love, Spirit) to prosper" (68).

This volume will be useful to anyone who is looking for a sound theological position from which to begin thinking through the difficult issues raised by pluralism. Although one author warns that some forms of trinitarian theology in the present are of questionable orthodoxy, the general consensus among the contributors is that trinitarian reflection will help us clarify our Christian understanding of God and what this means for our engagement with other religions and cultures. If we do not build on our trinitarian heritage, Newbiggin warns, it is likely that "the only image of God present in the public square will be a unitarian one, whether the increasingly powerful image of the Allah of the Qur'an, or the shadowy and ineffective God of a Christendom that has lost its nerve" (8).

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**HUMAN FREEDOM, CHRISTIAN  
RIGHTEOUSNESS: PHILIP MELAN-  
CHTHON'S EXEGETICAL DISPUTE  
WITH ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM,**

by Timothy J. Wengert. New York, Oxford: Oxford University, 1998. Pp. xiii + 239. \$45.00.

In this difficult but fascinating book Timothy Wengert probes a number of issues for readers who may have an interest in reformation history in general and in Philip Melanchthon in particular. The book rises from a continuing debate about the relation between the renaissance and the reformation. With this discussion as a backdrop, Wengert quickly narrows the focus to a consideration of Philip Melanchthon's exegetical dispute with Erasmus of Rotterdam. The author defines the purpose of his work as a survey of "the debate over free will from the tower of a single exegete's works on a single book of the Bible: Philip Melanchthon's commentaries on Paul's letter to the Colossians" (12).

The survey takes the reader through numerous doctrinal disputes from the reformation period; some technical aspects of rhetoric and language, including Latin and Greek; and an assessment of disputation and encomium between two humanist figures, Melanchthon and Erasmus. Something like the storm caused, in chaos theory, by the fluttering of a butterfly on the other side of the world, the exegetical and theological attack of these two important figures begins in a *nu*. In 1 Thess 2:7 ("But we were gentle among you") "either a *nu* was added, turning the word 'gentle ones' into 'infants,' or it was dropped, reversing the process" (6).

This discrepancy between the Vulgate and the Greek texts led Erasmus to interpret the passage one way, thus providing an opening for Melanchthon to offer a counter interpretation. Once the fluttering began, the discussion led to further letters, treatises, and disputations. It also led Melanchthon to publish his lectures and first

commentary on Colossians, the *Scholia in Epistolam Pauli ad Colossenses*. Wengert's book traverses the territory of this dispute, and concludes by showing how it helped shape the reformation discussion on justification, the two kingdoms, law and gospel, obedience to magistrates, and the adiaphora of ceremonies. The flutter of a *nu*, it seems, led to a storm of publications, resulting in the various editions of the *Loci Communes* as well as the *Augsburg Confession*.

Eight chapters cover the literary exchanges between Melanchthon and Erasmus as well as the rise, fall, and restoration of their mutual regard and relationship. Much of the story hinges on an understanding of renaissance rhetoric and its complex excesses. "Praise never defined agreement in thought; blame was couched in flowery language and can sometimes only be detected by veiled references and by what was left unsaid" (7). Wengert describes how Melanchthon's moderate style and desire for civility kept him in many conversations with people on all sides of many arguments. But he also notes that this hermeneutic of moderation often got Melanchthon into trouble (151-153).

The central controversy that dominated the relationship of Erasmus and Melanchthon was the freedom of the will. Erasmus appealed to the *consensus patristicus* and insisted that there was some human freedom in matters of salvation. Melanchthon, first with civility and then with increasing heat, disagreed with Erasmus in these matters, and carried on the discussion in the several additions to his *Scholia*. "Melanchthon managed in 1528 to attack not only the theological grounds for Erasmus's arguments in *De libero arbitrio* and *Hyperaspistes* but also its rhetorical and dialectical flaws and, in something that hit at the heart of Erasmus's program for moral reform, Erasmus's own behavior....Erasmus was finally a hypocrite...he was perhaps just another pagan philosopher" (101). Divergent ideas, initially discussed moderately,

led to vituperation and dissolution of the relationship.

Wengert tells this story well but in a technical manner suited more, perhaps, for scholars than for the general reader. The appendix and fifty-four pages of notes are primarily in Latin. The discussion of the variant editions of the *Scholia* can be labyrinthine. Consideration of the role of rhetoric presumes a specialized type of knowledge. Not everyone will fully comprehend what is going on when Wengert observes: "By admonition (*admonitio*) Melanchthon seemed to be thinking of that section of a speech called a *contentio*, consisting of a *confirmatio* and *confutatio*. In this case, Melanchthon's division allowed him to bring the *argumentum* to bear upon the various warnings in Col. 2 by invoking the rhetorical device of the *collatio*" (54). These reservations are not to say the book is not without value or charm. The relation of Erasmus and Melanchthon—with Luther as part of the mix—is a story well told. The insights into the areas where these men agreed and differed are quite helpful to anyone who is concerned with matters of history and doctrine. Flashes of humor rest among the rich detail: Noting that Erasmus was too wedded to philosophy, Wengert still defends the necessity for philosophy: "...those who rejected human philosophy were rejecting a gift of God. When Paul said, 'See that philosophy does not deceive,' it was no different than saying, 'See that you are not deceived by wine.' Clearly, Melanchthon would be no philosophical teetotaler!" (85).

Above all, this book is a refreshing, if critical, appraisal of Philip Melanchthon, a figure who has often been dismissed for his abiding moderation—some would say intolerable waffling. The latter may be true, but Wengert makes a case for Melanchthon's adherence to reformation principles, even to the point of his losing friendships for the sake of the truth. "The very thing that divided Melanchthon and Erasmus in 1527 continued to divide them sixteen years

later: a proper distinction between the two righteousnesses of God" (156).

What might be the readership of this book? One answer would be a specialty audience, those who are attuned to the nuances of Greek and Latin, or the intricacies of reformation history or the fine points of doctrinal disquisition and the fine art of rhetoric. On the other hand *Human Freedom, Christian Righteousness* could prove to be rewarding to the persevering reader who values sharp thinking, civil discourse, and the perdurance of *bonae litterae*. Finally, this book should appeal to anyone who values a critical but appreciative interpretation of the life and work of the much maligned Melancthon.

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**RESHAPING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: CONVERSATIONS ON CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE**, by Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998. Pp. 224. \$18.00.

How refreshing it is to review a book that neither claims to offer a totally new way of being about the ministry of religious education nor denigrates the classroom as a context in which the teaching and the learning of faith and values takes place. These writers carefully examine social, political, religious, and educational issues that have been around for a long time, and offer new ways of understanding and responding to them. They do so, however, always in the rich context of a philosophical and theological heritage. Among the issues they address are the foundations of religious education, pluralism, developmentalism, gender, and, ecology. And, while admitting the value of technology for religious education, and the multiple settings in which learning goes on, they do hold a place of honor for the classroom as a place for reflection and growth. If for no other reason than

these two, pastors and other educators can be encouraged to read and respond to this new book by this husband and wife team. But there are other reasons as well.

For example, there is the style in which the book is written. As the title suggests, it is meant to be a conversation between two persons who bring their varying perspectives to the topics under discussion. Sometimes they agree with each other, but not always. Mostly each offers a nuance to what the other has written—a nuance that readers may have been wondering about as they find themselves drawn into the conversation. Not everyone is going to agree with everything Gabriel and Maria (the way they address each other in the book) have to say, but they will be challenged to think about the way they propose for reshaping religious education. The style also suggests a way that team teaching can be done in positive ways. There is no doubt, even in the pages, that Maria and Gabriel are present to each other as they write this book—a requisite for effective team teaching.

Gabriel proposes that there are two basic purposes for religious education: "(1) to teach people to practice a religious way of life and (2) to teach people to understand religion" (30). Not many readers are going to disagree with the first of these purposes. While she does not lay out a pattern for how to teach that way in her chapter entitled "Teaching the Way," she does suggest some thoughtful categories for leaders in the church to explore as they look at their particular congregations and the church at large. She asks, and then responds to the questions: What is living, what is dying, and, what is rising in the Christian communities of today? She might have asked, where is the Spirit leading the church, and how is it that those in educational ministry are being led to follow? As readers compare/contrast their responses with Maria, they will be encouraged to discover ways to be about a dynamic ministry of education for today and tomorrow in the places where they live and serve.

The second purpose of religious education noted above is more problematical, and that problem begins with the writers' understanding of the first. That is, it is the purpose of religious education to enable Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims, as well as Christians, to practice a way of life according to their own faith traditions. Having done that, then the purpose is to teach the faithful to understand religion and to value the truth that comes in the many and various ways it is expressed. Those who connect evangelism and education as the two dimensions that empower the church to be about its mission of making disciples of all nations may well find difficulty with that purpose. According to Gabriel and Maria, however, it is a necessary purpose in the neighborhood of many religions in which we live.

While it is clear that Maria and Gabriel write out of their faith tradition as Christians, and even more particularly as Roman Catholics, they also allude in the book to what it is other faith traditions can teach Christians. Gabriel, for example, wonders if Christians were too quick to discount the possibilities of reincarnation in their understanding of death (89). Maria, recognizing a "Center" in the life of all people, is content to name it "Wisdom, Mother, Goddess, Father, Thou"—"or we may not name it at all" (119). They also devote a whole chapter to what Christians can learn from Jews.

Some readers might also have difficulty with their notion that religious education includes the dimensions of the priestly, the prophetic, and the political. The priestly, of course, has long been associated with education, and few would argue that this is what education must be about. That's at the beginning of the first purpose. There might be some discussion about the role of the prophetic in religious education, and those questions would only increase in number and volume with the inclusion of the political. Maria and Gabriel make no apologies for including all three; nor do they hesitate to share their stance on many of the political

issues of the day, such as arguing for universal medical care and welcoming gays and lesbians. Hopefully, readers who do not agree with what these writers include in religious education, or in the stances they take with respect to certain issues, will not be dissuaded from delving into the book and finding the richness it has to offer.

Maria and Gabriel are skillful writers. Maria tends to be more of a storyteller than her husband, and Gabriel is more of an analyst of the issues they present, but both use images and phrases that pastors and teachers will want to incorporate into their own preaching and teaching. The application in educational practice of how to respond to the issues they raise is somewhat less helpful. Their suggestions would seem to work best for persons like themselves—professional educators who have contacts all over the globe and who are invited to participate in conferences and workshops that put them in touch with people everywhere. One clear exception is Maria's discussion of the sabbath and jubilee as a foundation for both Jewish and Christian spirituality. Those looking for ways to be creative and positive in response to the millennium soon to be upon us will find helpful suggestions in the chapter "Proclaiming Jubilee."

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**THE ENGLISH HYMN: A CRITICAL AND HISTORICAL STUDY**, by J. R. Watson. New York: Oxford University, 1997. Pp. xi + 552. \$125.00.

The problem with this book is its price, but, if you can afford it, you will be rewarded. You will also have to afford some time. This is not a "quick read." It is a lengthy and detailed study that works out from the hymn texts themselves.

J. R. Watson, Professor of English at the University of Durham, begins with a sensi-

tive discussion of hymns and their contexts. He writes about their problems as a special species of verse, their power, their use in worship, literary criticism of them, their biblical codes, and the interpretive community of the church where they are used. Then he addresses metrical, musical, and structural matters. It takes about 40 pages for all of that. The rest of the book cuts a wide swath through the history of the English hymn, from the "Old Version" of the Psalms at the reformation to brief mention of the hymn explosion in the late twentieth century. In between those end points we encounter Wither, Donne, Herbert, seventeenth-century Anglicans, Puritans pushing from metrical psalms towards hymns, Watts and his followers, the Wesleys and their followers, Montgomery, Heber, Keble, the Oxford Movement, Victorian women, Americans, Gospel hymns, African American hymns, collections that challenged *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, and children's hymns. Watson's book stands in the lineage of its namesake by Louis F. Benson (*The English Hymn: Its Development and Use in Worship*. Richmond: John Knox Press, reprinted 1962 from the 1915 George H. Doran Company edition), but the two books are not the same. Their subtitles indicate the differences. Benson was concerned about the development of the English hymn and its use in worship, while Watson has constructed a critical and historical study of the texts themselves. Watson speaks appreciatively of Benson's work, but notes that it

rarely ventures into critical or descriptive language...there has not been much serious attention to the words of a hymn, treating them as part of a literary study in the way one might examine a poem. . . on the whole texts of hymns have received little serious study from students of English literature. [The exception of Donald Davie is noted on p. ix.] This book is an attempt to provide that study. (p. vii)

Provide that study it does. In beautifully descriptive language Watson works from writer to writer and hymn to hymn. Long

paragraphs deftly move the narrative forward with ample quotations from the hymns themselves. The meanings of the texts are gleaned from the inside out. This is what was promised, literary criticism of hymns in the English language. It is an analysis of their structures, their poetic devices, the pace of a text, how words are put together, and what they signify. Watson reports the "usual accuracy" of James Montgomery's analyses (137), the "unexpected splash of colour" in Watts (168), the "civilized seriousness" of Doddridge (190), the "neatness and snap" of a couplet by Wesley (259), the "springy effect" of a text by John Cennick (271), the "unevenness" of Faber (367), Neale's "spectacular" vocabulary (381, the only page I found with a typographical mistake on it), and then lets the texts yield up their meanings. Dependencies and historical circumstances are included to help the understanding. For example, in addition to liturgical and theological contexts, literary dependencies on Shakespeare (291) and Milton (513-515) are cited, Darwin's "natural selection" is applied to nineteenth-century hymnody, (341), the influence of slavery is explained (474), and the analysis of Freud is taken into account (497). Biographical details come into play only as they help to elucidate the texts, as for Henry Francis Lyte (346) or Anna Laetitia Waring (446-449).

In one sense *The English Hymn* is an objective study by a very able scholar. In another sense this very able scholar discloses his "enduring love" of hymns (x) and, without avoiding or losing his objective and professional rigor, he works out his analysis with a secondary objective:

to help the Church be aware of the distinctive and precious heritage of hymnic art which it possesses, and to remove the prejudices of literary critics who have been too easily inclined to see the hymn as a second-rate art form. (16)

This double task is related to his hope that



this book will do something to preserve the idea of the hymn as it once was, an important feature of a religious service and a living expression of the human spirit. (ix)

He suspects, however, that it may be too little too late. He writes while the hymn is “still alive, while it is still some kind of presence in liturgy and life” (ix), but its current neglect inside and outside the church (532) suggests to him that it will soon be swept away and remain only a “subject for academic study” (ix) among “Church historians and antiquarians” (532).

Pastors, church musicians, and church members (Americans included: though the book has a British cast, Americans will find most of it common to their continent) who want to know something about English hymns are likely to discover Watson’s discussions of individual writers, their texts, and their contexts to be valuable for preach-

ing, teaching, and understanding. Finding a specific hymn will take some sleuthing, however. There is no index of hymns (*many* are cited), and the Index, mostly of persons, is only six pages long. You have to work from the Table of Contents or the Index, then peruse a general vicinity of the text for a hymn you may be trying to find.

Unless you have strong literary critical interests or want more general insights that help us understand our current historical place, you are not likely to read this book from cover to cover. Reading it in part or whole, however, will be worth your while. Individuals will have to determine whether they can afford it. Libraries, including church libraries, should surely buy it.

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