

Reviews



OLD TESTAMENT EXEGESIS: A HANDBOOK FOR STUDENTS AND PASTORS, by Douglas Stuart. Louisville: Westminster John Knox. 2001. Pp. 179. \$14.95 (paper).

In a sense this book needs no review for it is well known from its first two editions. The first edition, (1980, 143 pp.), was translated into Chinese. The revised and enlarged second edition (1984), about the same length, appeared in a larger format, had more information, updated the bibliography, and added a chapter of examples to illustrate the steps of a full exegesis. This newest edition, coming as it does after a hiatus of seventeen years and multiple foreign language translations, offers the same material, again updated, plus the addition of an abbreviated outline of the exegetical format for pastors with special attention paid to homiletical interests (Chapter 3). Students and anyone undertaking a full-fledged exegesis are still encouraged to take the longer route. Helpful also is a newly appended “List of Common Old Testament Exegesis Terms.”

Clearly, many have profited from the first editions of this book. There is nothing quite like it, and considering how hard it is to keep books in print, the author and the publishers are to be commended for having produced a useful tool.

This edition again offers a detailed and step-by-step explanation of the historical, literary, formal, structural, grammatical, lexical, contextual, and theological areas of exegesis. What can one say except to recommend this book to those who are interested in leaving no stone unturned according to modern exegetical methodology?

However, new with this edition is a “List of Frequent Hermeneutical Errors.” Under

“Allegorizing,” we read that the error of allegorizing lies in

Assuming that the components of a passage have meaning only as symbols of Christian truths. (“The ‘lover’ is Christ; the ‘beloved’ is the Church; the ‘daughters of Jerusalem’ are the Scriptures.”) (178)

To begin with, however, by inserting the word “only” this definition is unfair to many in the church who have utilized the allegorical method. No one in the history of Christian interpretation has ever said that the symbolic or allegorical meaning is the “only” meaning. Even Origen, while showing a preference for the spiritual meaning, cannot be quoted as saying there was no meaning at the literal level. His massive work on the *Hexapla* reveals his respect for the literal sense. The more developed medieval fourfold meaning of scripture likewise conceded the foundational function of the literal sense. “The spiritual sense...is based on the literal and presupposes it” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Q. I. Art. 10. Obj. 3).

If we drop the indefensible “only” we understand that the author wants to warn his readers that it is an error to assume that the components of a passage have meaning as symbols of Christian truths. If this were the case, then Paul flunks the exegetical test (see Gal 4).

The objections to following Paul in the use of allegory have been countered by Henri de Lubac. Paul is not following the Stoics or Philo by employing a philosophical allegory. He is using it to clarify the gospel. His one-time use of allegory opened the way for many apologists in the early church to defend against the heresies of Marcion and the Gnostics, who found in the literal sense ingenious ways of distorting the faith once delivered.

Another frequent hermeneutical error listed by Stuart is “Typologizing”:

Assuming that certain real biblical characters or things are mentioned *in order to* foreshadow other real—and more important—characters or things. (“Joshua has the same name as Jesus; as a conqueror he points to The Conqueror.” “Ezra came to the people from afar; entered into Jerusalem on a donkey; prayed before crises; taught what was to many a new law; purified the nation, etc. His life points *directly* to the Savior.”) (178, emphasis mine)

The words “in order to” and “directly,” like the word “only,” tilt typology into absurdity. A modern Christian employing typology need not believe that the Old Testament type was written “in order to” foreshadow Christ, nor that events in the Old Testament point “directly” to Christ. And a postmodern Christian can even delight in the multiple possibilities of deconstructing—and reconstructing—a text.

Paul sees the rock in the wilderness as Christ (1 Cor 10). Arguing that the author(s) of the wilderness wanderings did not intend to preach Christ misses the point. Christ can be seen by Christians on every page of the Old Testament. The intention of Christian interpreters is precisely to point to the “more important” event of Christ.

The last three chapters of C. S. Lewis’s *Reflections on the Psalms* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1958) are must reading for the Christian exegete intimidated by modern methodology. Finding second meanings in the Old Testament is an inextricable part of the New Testament. This is the right—not to say duty—of every Christian reader of the Bible.

The methodology Stuart represents is simply the modern, more sophisticated way of getting to that second meaning. Fine. Be as sophisticated as you need be. But preach Christ. And if you find yourself prompted to short-circuit the process by a colorful allegory or arresting typology, do so with a clear conscience. You are not, in my opinion, committing a hermeneutical error.

If unintended second meanings are in-

admissible errors, then Jesus did not reveal the divine mind when he stumped the experts with his use of Psalm 110 (“How can the Messiah be both David’s Son and his Lord?”). He made an egregious exegetical mistake because he took the superscription at face value and did not understand that the author was not David but a court poet.

If unintended meanings are taboo, then Jesus was on indefensible hermeneutical ground when he proved the resurrection on the basis of Exod 3.

Use all the modern tools at your disposal, but even more, permit the Holy Spirit to suggest whatever gets Christ across.

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PAUL IN THE ROMAN WORLD: THE CONFLICT AT CORINTH, by Robert M. Grant. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001. Pp. 181. \$19.95 (paper).

In spite of the newer interests in literary studies of the New Testament documents, which often bracket out historical, social, and cultural matters that have a bearing upon them, a good many scholars keep curiosity alive about those very things. Robert Grant is one such person. He has had a long and distinguished career in the study of the New Testament and other early Christian documents, particularly those of the second and third centuries. In this book he indicates that he has had a special interest in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians since the 1930s. His interest has been fueled by the evidence that the letter provides about the early history of the Christian church.

The book is divided into nine brief, but well-packed, chapters. The first four chapters constitute Part I, which is entitled “Business and Politics” but is more comprehensive than the title suggests. In those chapters the author reviews how and when Paul arrived at Corinth and what he found there. The city had been populated largely by colonists from Rome, and its primary

economic base was trade. Grant proceeds to review 1 Corinthians, discussing issues that emerge, such as divisions in the church, claims of “knowledge,” controversies over diet and meals, freedom, women and men, the church as body, love, speaking in tongues, the resurrection, and more. The survey is essentially a brief commentary on the letter. But there is also a point of view that emerges. According to Grant, the Corinthian Christians were not “otherworldly Gnostics” but “Greek Christians committed to the liberty of which they heard him speak and apparently interpreting it in the light of conventional ideas of democratic organization.” Paul opposed egalitarian expressions of Christian community. “He is determined to uphold divine monarchy, mediated through himself as sent from God. There is no room for ‘grass roots.’ All, ‘Jews or Greeks, slaves or free’ (12:13), are members of the one body, which does not function in an egalitarian manner. There are higher gifts and lower gifts (12:31)” (44).

Part II of the book contains three chapters gathered under the general theme “Religion and Ritual.” Basing his treatment on both literary and archaeological evidence, Grant identifies the various gods and goddesses worshiped at Corinth in Paul’s day. The other two chapters deal with baptism and Eucharist in 1 Corinthians and in early Christian writers of the second century. On these topics the author actually gives little attention to the Pauline texts. Much more is given to writers other than Paul that are not really pertinent to Corinth. They are of interest, however, to the history of early Christianity. Some texts cited show how Roman writers perceived Christians at worship. Others illustrate how early liturgical forms developed.

“Paul on Sexuality” is the title for Part III, and it has two chapters. Here Grant takes up a number of issues that have perennial interest, including contraception, abortion, homosexuality, and marriage between Christians and non-Christians. On each of these matters the author brings a wide collection of ancient texts into the dis-

ussion, from both pre-Christian Greco-Roman writers and early Christian writers after Paul. His sweeping statement that “obviously [Paul] is opposed to male homosexual acts (1 Cor 6:9)” and his claim that Paul’s use of the term “contrary to nature” (Rom 1:26) has parallels in seven Hellenistic authors (124) will find a welcome among some readers, but dismay among others who are calling for a more differentiated reading of the evidence in both Paul and the others cited.

If there is a common methodology among the various chapters, it is that the author takes up a particular issue in the reading of 1 Corinthians, examines Greco-Roman views on it from texts available, explicates the Pauline text in light of those texts, and finally reviews other early Christian texts (giving primary attention to those related to Corinth) to see what light they might shed when one looks back at Paul’s own statements. The writings of Clement of Rome, the *Didache*, Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, and Tertullian are most often cited.

At the end of the book the author states the purpose of his work. That is to see how the early church, beset with conflict, both replaced and assimilated ideas from the Greco-Roman world (133). The book itself is deceptively simple in appearance, and it provides easy and pleasant reading. But it is a book that displays the work of a seasoned scholar who has brought an immense amount of resources to the task, as the extensive references (taking up 28 pages) to Greco-Roman and patristic works show.

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THE IMAGINATIVE WORLD OF THE REFORMATION, by Peter Matheson. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001. Pp. 153. \$15.00 (paper).

Many people have images of the Reformation that are based on the heroic words and pictures of Martin Luther. Those images in turn may derive from Sunday School

or confirmation texts, or from the epic movie made in the 1950s. In this book, Peter Matheson, a Reformation scholar from Australia, challenges these heroic images in the light of new perspectives and scholarship. He signals his intention with the picture on the cover, not a strident Luther but a leering jester, *The Fool*, by Heinrich Vogtherr, the Younger.

Eschewing traditional academic approaches to the period, Matheson focuses on the imaginative world of the Reformation. He highlights popular literature, grassroots movements, and the influence of the laity. In so doing he finds that “the reforming process was not fundamentally about ideas in the mind or structures in church and state but indicated much more elemental changes in spiritual direction. These are signposted by the creative metaphors of the preachers and teachers, the images in literature and art, the rhythms and melodies of the popular ballads and chorales which sang the Reformation into people’s souls” (6).

Matheson spells out these ideas in six essay chapters. For a reader familiar with the works of Steven Ozment or Heiko Oberman, there may not be many surprises. But for those whose view of the Reformation is based on Roland Bainton’s classic work, there will be some eye-openers. For instance, Thomas Müntzer receives almost as much positive play as Luther. Müntzer is credited with persuading the people of the little town of Allstedt in 1523 to utilize a vernacular liturgy and to sing new songs of the Spirit. Matheson softens the effects of Müntzer’s controversial life by highlighting the rebel reformer’s spiritual counseling, his piety, and his contribution to hymnody. Though examples of the latter are minimal, the text includes a lovely communion hymn and a gentle prayer (128). For those who may have overlooked Erich Gritsch’s older book on Müntzer, *Reformer without a Church*, Matheson’s attention to this reformer opens some fresh ground for reflection.

Another figure close to Matheson’s heart is the even more unfamiliar Argula von

Grumbach, an impressive laywoman. References to this “Mother Courage” occur with regularity through the book. Indeed, chapter five tells the compelling story of von Grumbach and another woman of the time, Magdalena Behaim. Lifting up the laity in general and women in particular advances Matheson’s thesis with respect to elemental changes in the Reformation.

In discussing von Grumbach’s difficult but influential life, the author uses her as a lens on sixteenth century life. For example, von Grumbach’s concern for her son’s education provides insight into Reformation-period education and pedagogy. Through letters and commentary she and Matheson tell us that schooling and the formative role of education go hand in hand. The concerned mother advises her son George not to claw at the food caught between his teeth like a dog or cat.

Likewise, she gives advice about not urinating in public, keeping his hair neat, and learning honor, obedience, and love (115). Through von Grumbach’s correspondence and travails we get glimpses of daily life during the Reformation. “We enter the unremittingly hard shadow side of the religious imagination of the Reformers. Perhaps, as we do so, we may be able to empathize better and see the human face of the Reformation” (108).

Matheson’s thesis is that the turmoil of the Reformation period brought about shifts in the imaginative world. On the one hand, he contends, the early sixteenth century was eminently Utopian. Egalitarian yearnings were couched in biblical terms. The covenant became a central biblical paradigm that in turn influenced the political imagination. Vocation, civic service, the sense of commonality and commonwealth were all images that informed the collective consciousness. Yet, at the same time, there was a dimension of nightmare about the Reformation as well. Matheson describes the witch-hunts, the destabilization brought on by repressive measures throughout the land, even the theological road-rage that prevailed in the church and

university. “There may perhaps be no access to the heritage of the Reformation until we come to terms with its nightmarish dimensions—its divisiveness and destructive polemic, for example” (78).

Many of these images are illustrated by woodcuts of the period. The illustrations are a strength and a weakness in the book. On the one hand, illustrations from the period give visual credibility to the argument in the text. However, many of the illustrations are blurry and poorly reproduced. Moreover, a picture may be discussed in the text a number of pages away from the illustration without a page directory to the illustrations. This separation creates reader frustration, which increases when certain works are described and not illustrated, while others are illustrated but not described.

One wonders who the readership of this book will be. The scholarship may be somewhat complicated for the general reader, and it may prove too basic for the specialist. Moreover, the subject matter of this book assumes a thirst for history in general and a taste for Reformation studies in particular. One wonders if such appetite exists in the general reading public. For readers with a curious turn of mind, however, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation* can supply a number of rewards. Getting acquainted with Argula von Grumbach and a large cast of lay characters is a rewarding task. Moreover, time spent taking a look at the Reformation, which many of us think we know from Sunday School lesson books, is not wasted.

Moreover, Matheson discusses many matters that bear a discomfiting resemblance to dynamics at work in the church today. He notes, for example, that when metaphors change, the world changes with them (7). In the light of recent events in American history this observation is as soberingly true now as it was in the sixteenth century. Further, when Matheson notes that many people of the Reformation period had lost their traditional deference for both church and political leaders (95), he

identifies a dynamic that is still present in church work. In a different light, the discussion on the spirituality of the Reformation in chapter 6 provides a helpful insight on the power of the religious imagination then and now.

Of course, reading about the sixteenth century will neither address nor solve today’s problems. But it is possible to read Reformation history with a nod of recognition that gives one both pause and perspective. Those who have a good ear for history will enjoy reading Matheson’s book and savoring his argument. “The Reformation...was more a song or a symphony than a system, more lyric than lecture, more a leap of the imagination than one of those social restructurings we are so heartily sick of today” (26). By opening the imaginative world of the Reformation, Matheson helps the reader sing a song and take a leap.

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A NEW CHRISTIANITY FOR A NEW WORLD: WHY TRADITIONAL FAITH IS DYING & HOW A NEW FAITH IS BORN, by John Shelby Spong. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001. Pp. 276. \$24.00 (cloth).

The dust jacket of the copy sent to me for review says that the author, a former Episcopalian bishop, is a leading spokesman for “liberal Christianity.” The bishop, however, does not seem to like that label or any other. If anything he would probably call himself a reformer, a re-newer of the church. For him change is mandatory:

Being delusional about our situation will not help: our constant attempts to deny reality are ultimately ineffective. Shouting loudly while pretending that we still believe will not help either; fundamentalism will finally result in even greater disillusionment. Nor will it suffice to reshape the church into something that has more recognized status, more cachet: liberal solutions that focus the church on social ac-

tion, self-help counseling, and efforts at spiritual direction are as dead as is fundamentalist hysteria. Liberals [!] are reaction people, defining themselves as “not fundamentalists.” They are unable to say what they are because there is no ground left under their feet. (240)

Church folk whom I meet in adult forums here and there ask me to comment on Bishop Spong. If they have not read one of his books, they have heard him on public radio, or seen him on national television shows such as *60 Minutes*, *Good Morning America*, *Politically Incorrect*, *Larry King Live*, or William Buckley’s *Firing Line*. A public relations firm handles his media tours. He received ten thousand letters—90% from lay people—in response to his book prior to this one. Favorable letters outranked negative comments three to one. The William Belden Noble lectures that he was invited to give at Harvard form the basis of this most recent book.

Every beginning student of theology

must confront the distinction between faith and thought, between the act of believing in God and the act of conceiving what that means. Faith is a given—a gift of the Spirit if you will—but thinking about what that means can be hard work and no one has ever got it exactly right in translating faith into thought. Bishop Spong has no argument with the faith that has been handed down in what is known as tradition. Faith begins in what he would call the “timeless God-experience” which is too often confused with “time-warped God-explanations.” His thesis is that a new Christianity can still be in touch with the original experience of believers 2,000 years ago, but that it must be first liberated from the God-explanations that are no longer tenable. “My problem is not faith,” he writes, “but the literal way” humans have articulated that faith.

So far so good: Who could disagree? Colleagues who teach scripture, for example, would agree that they have no problem with

the Bible as revelation but they want to disabuse their students of certain ways of interpreting the Bible. The root problem in reading the Bible or saying the creeds or reciting the liturgy is not in the tradition and its language as such. Spong asserts that the root problem can be found in the way Christians still cling to conventional ways of thinking about God and related topics. And so, Spong's proposals are radical in the sense of going to the root. For him the root of the problem is—in a word—theism. He makes no effort to salvage the word theism for Christian thought in the postmodern era. He is convinced that it is hopelessly tied up with premodern conceptions of the world. He thinks that the way in which fundamentalists defend theism is ridiculous and the liberals' revisionist forms of theism make it inaccessible to the speech of ordinary people. We must, he says, liberate and extricate Jesus from a way of thinking about God summed up in the word "theism."

Theism, in Spong's lexicon, implies a worldview in which God is thought to be a wholly transcendent power that controls and predetermines every event exactly as it happens. This definition of God and the world has had a long history, according to Spong, because, until the modern period, it helped people cope with vulnerability, meaninglessness, and death. People could take comfort in theism, Spong believes, because all things somehow have a meaning and value if they are willed by this unseen and all-powerful version of God. But theism is dying and substitutes for coping have arisen: New Age spirituality, gurus of all varieties, diet fads, and so on. Inasmuch as theism was a premodern social construction of reality, a coping device for keeping hysteria under control, it can just as well be deconstructed and a new understanding of God can be proposed. Theism is dying but God is not dying. The thought forms and symbols that served as vessels for faith in the premodern world have died over the course of modernity, and now they just do not work in the postmodern world. That's the point of this book.

It is not hard to see why many thoughtful Christians are reading Spong. The very questions that Spong addresses are troublesome to them. Tillich is a strong influence on his writing, and so this book, as Tillich said of his own work, brings comfort to those who have questions and discomfort to those who question nothing about the tradition. One way for pastors to bring theology to life in their own parishes would be to read this book with the faithful who have questions.

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CHRISTIAN FAITH AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY: MOBILIZATION FOR THE HUMAN FAMILY, ed. by John B. Cobb, Jr. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002. Pp. 69. \$6.00 (paper).

John B. Cobb, Jr., the editor, is a process theologian in the areas of interreligious dialogue, ecological theology, and Christian service. He is professor of theology emeritus at Claremont School of Theology.

There are two distinct sections in this book. First, Cobb attempts to describe ways in which Christians can reflect theologically on the subject of religious diversity with minimized negative reaction toward other faiths. This is supported with valuable information for understanding the richness of the religious diversity within which we live. Second, he suggests ways that Christian individuals and congregations can show their hospitality to adherents of other faiths.

After a concise examination of the respective strengths of nine religious groups in the United States, namely, Judaism, Islam, Baha'i, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Native American Religions, Cobb concludes that the United States has become increasingly religiously pluralistic. People with unusual faith expressions and commitments that once were viewed as irrelevant, foreign, or exotic have come, and live not only in urban but also rural America. Even now we may

find that our neighbors have faiths that are very different from ours, and their children have already become friends with our children. Then he asks how we should respond as individuals and as a religious community to the presence of people with other faith traditions.

Such a response can take many forms. Cobb suggests, however, that we should not approach religious diversity only hoping to learn about other beliefs, customs, and practices, but with the intention of gaining insights and wisdom that can enrich our own lives and religious experience.

What about evangelism? Cobb suggests that we create a climate of dialogue in which there is no manipulation, no effort on anyone's part to convert the others (65). Therefore, his non-confrontational interreligious dialogue is for qualitative mutual enrichment and his basic missional position is not oriented toward conversion.

Lastly, he tackles a critical issue, interfaith marriage, which has not been adequately addressed. How are we supposed to respond when one of our Christian friends seeks our advice about marriage to a person of a different faith? Cobb suggests the following four possible choices with regard to the expression of the couple's religious beliefs (67):

1. They can agree to be nonreligious;
2. One spouse can convert;
3. They can celebrate everything and leave the choice to the children at a later date;
4. They can forge an understanding that binds their religions together while continuing to celebrate both traditions in their distinctiveness.

Cobb concludes that the fourth option is the most viable one, because both spouses will feel spiritually whole and raise spiritually whole children together.

My initial impression of Cobb's approach to religious diversity is that of its openness and respect. He intends to learn from other faith traditions and hopes to build relationship with them while main-

taining distinct individual religious convictions. This short book of sixty-nine pages really reveals a lot about his position of being a Christocentric pluralist. It is obvious that he stands on his Christian faith commitment while pursuing interreligious mutual understanding.

I find that his discussion on interfaith marriage is most valuable and applicable. It is not only relevant but also significant. Because of the nature of the pluralistic society in which we live, we should reflect on this issue and be ready to respond when this challenge emerges in our congregations or even in our families, regardless of the position that we incline to take.

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DOING JUSTICE: CONGREGATIONS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING,

by Dennis A. Jacobsen. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001. Pp. 140. \$14.00 (paper).

Community organizing as a ministry strategy, particularly in an urban context, achieved its greatest popularity during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Seminaries often included courses in community organizing in the conviction that such training would better prepare future pastors to help congregations address the issues that they faced in such turbulent times. Since those days the appeal of community organizing as a resource for effective ministry has waned, but it has not entirely disappeared.

In fact, Dennis Jacobsen, pastor of Incarnation Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, has pointed to congregation-based community organizing as an "emerging phenomenon," one that builds off the legacy of the earlier movement while placing more emphasis on the congregation than on the individual community organizer. Jacobsen's vantage point is that of the director of the fastest growing network of four congregation-based community or-

ganizations in the United States—the Gamaliel Foundation.

This new phenomenon is indebted to two central figures of the earlier movement: Saul Alinsky and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Congregation-based community organizing joins the values and principles of Dr. King to the methodology of Saul Alinsky. Here we have a creative, often uneasy tension between faithfulness and effectiveness, morality and expediency, conscience and compromise, the prophetic and the practical, the world as it should be and the world as it is...it is within this tension that a creative and intriguing experiment is under way in scores of cities throughout the United States. (24)

The importance of such work is grounded in the conviction that the primary place for the witness of the church is in the public arena rather than within the sanctuary. The mission of the church is the same mission that Jesus had—to proclaim the kingdom of God, the world as it should be, in opposition the many kingdoms of the world, the world as it is. God is encountered and followed by engaging in ministry with and on behalf of those who suffer in the world. Hence, the need for the church to enter the “this worldliness” of public life, and the importance of congregation-based community organizing as the vehicle for entering that public space, is established.

Having made the claim for the need and importance of congregation-based community organizing in the first third of the book, Jacobsen concentrates in the middle third (chapters 5-8) on identifying and describing what gives such activity its unique character: its understanding of power, self-interest, one-on-ones, and agitation. Power in itself is neutral, but is to be used by the church to create social change on behalf of the oppressed through its effective application in the public arena. The source of power is God and it is best exemplified in Jesus’ activity with his emphasis on “healing, humility, shared wealth, and nonviolence” (47).

Self-interest is understood as a relational reality in contrast to both selfishness and selflessness. Attending to self-interest becomes a process of self-discovery and self-becoming through which congregation-based community organizing “creates a community of people who share common self-interests and who are deepened in their self-discovery through liberation struggles” (58).

Because organizing is more authentically about the building of relationships than about the attention to issues, the one-on-one interview is the fundamental way in which organizing and community building take place. Agitation as a technique for drawing out the best in people is valid only in the context of an established relationship. Then the struggle, tension, risk, and even pain that accompany the willingness to agitate people can be seen as an acceptable cost of giving birth to new life.

The last third of the book (chapters 9-12) attends to the implications of using the methods and commitments entailed in congregation-based community organizing to motivate and guide the activity of congregations. Of particular value here is the emphasis on the creation of community, and the recognition that such difficult activity in the face of the “abusive power, consuming greed, relentless violence, and narcissistic pride” (1) that characterize the world as it is depends on a spirituality that can nourish the inner contemplative life for sustaining ministry over time.

Compared with some of the harshness and even abusive behavior sometimes associated with the methods of community organizing, Jacobsen describes a less strident reality, one more sensitive to the humanness that is a part of all activity. He is no less concerned about the need for action on the part of congregations, however, to seek justice and proclaim the kingdom of God’s presence in the world. At the same time there remains a perhaps too rigid dualistic view of the world in which the described contrast between the world as it is and the world as it should be, with which Jacobsen

begins his book, has the effect of negating the doctrine of a good creation in spite of his later efforts to see the work of congregation-based community organizing as part of the co-creative work of God.

At a time when a congregation's role in the public arena appears to have become quite unclear, Jacobsen's challenge for such engagement is a welcome one. The specific emphasis on congregation-based community organizing is equally welcome. As it "seeks to restore the human face freed of the masks imposed by racism and classism, freed of the masks worn to survive the streets of urban America, freed of the masks of victimization and self-depreciation" (102-103), to the extent that it is able to contribute to such results, it is not only congregations that will benefit but the whole fabric of the society.

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**MOVING BEYOND CHURCH GROWTH:
AN ALTERNATIVE VISION FOR
CONGREGATIONS**, by Mark A. Olson.
Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002. Pp. 156.
\$15.00 (paper).

One of the central critiques made of the church and its praxis by modernism is that it is irrelevant: in its preaching, music, liturgy, and programming. Accordingly, modernism says that what the church centers around—the word and sacrament—no longer is dynamic enough fully to convey Christ to and for us. The result of such critique is that many congregations have sought to be "all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22) through worship and other programming driven by and designed for the common hurts and needs of the people who would attend such gatherings.

The question is: Does it work? Mark Olson replies: No! "Church growth places the hurts and hopes of humankind at the center of the church's life. Such an audacious

move pushes God toward the edge" (21). A few examples of how this occurs are instructive. For Martin Luther, justification by faith is the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls; in contrast, "the modern church exists as a tool for individual faith development, using the social sciences as its foundation" (21). When preachers proclaim the gospel they say, "Jesus died and was raised from death for you"; when proponents of the modernist church growth proposal mount the pulpit, they may preach, "Five steps towards getting your prayers answered." For, "the modern church must proclaim a message that is certain, objective, beyond influence, and optimistic" (21). In many ways, church growth has rewritten a common old hymn: "They Will Know We Are Christians by our *Curvatus In Se*."

Throughout the remainder of the book, Olson seeks to cast a *vision* "[which] focuses primarily on the congregation and parish pastors and what can assist these communities of faith to live into a post-church-growth vision" (4).

Chapter three discusses the merits of utilizing a "Faith Audit," that rather than statistical reports might best represent the faithfulness of the ministry in a congregational context. "The primary task of the church involves proclaiming God's Word, not focusing on the results" (45). When we focus on results, which statistical reports do, "such self-preoccupation refocuses the vision away from God, leading to discouragement and despair" (45).

The next chapter, "Deprogramming the Church," is an important one for evangelism committees to reflect on. "The temptation is for the church to aggressively pursue what has been lost, recapture it, and force it to return" (52). Instead of prowling around for the "lost," Olson calls the church to consider that its mission instead is this: "to be an actively waiting and praying people whose identity is rooted in God's story of redemption through Jesus Christ" (53).

The fifth chapter, "Reclaiming the Sabbath: One Text at a Time," is a fictitious nar-

rative account of how one woman comes to understand that “Programs [for church renewal] are like pills; they are expensive and usually only mask the disease” (61). How can the church find renewal, if not through a program? “We found out that God has already given us what we need: God’s Holy Word” (62). Precisely.

The sixth chapter, “Drawing the Line: Reflections on Church Growth and Worship,” is perhaps the most provocative and one that might fruitfully be discussed in text study groups. Specifically, a fellow pastor asks Olson to support a mission congregation. After listening, Olson says, “I could not support the new mission, because it would be developed using basic church-growth principles” (63). The rest of the chapter is a personalized response to the pastor who invited him into this new mission. An example: “I, like you, desire for the gospel of Jesus Christ to be spread to all. I just don’t believe the new mission, in its present formulation, will fulfill this deep desire” (69).

In chapter nine, “Each Congregation: One Pastor,” Olson proposes just what the title of the chapter says. What follows is Olson’s arguments concerning why such a principle is advantageous. This proposal is especially exciting given the current lack of clergy and candidates for ordination in many mainline denominations. What this forces us to ask is this: Could it be, as Olson suggests time and time again in the book, that God has given us what we need?

Chapter ten, “Recovering the Ministerium: A Congregation for Pastors,” is an interesting concept that might best be discussed between clergy, rostered leaders, and their bishop. Olson presents the fictitious account of a bishop who says at the synod assembly that instead of being mired down in the bureaucratic work of the bishopric, they are now going to take their work as *pastor to the pastors and other rostered leaders and their families* seriously. The questions remain: “What would this mean? Was it realistic?” Olson says yes: “It is...an acknowledgement that those people the church has set apart to be its leaders have little opportunity to be encouraged, embraced, challenged, and provoked by the gospel of Jesus. Only the gospel can provide the challenge and encouragement that is needed” (107).

There are other parts of this book that could not be touched on, but are also well worth reading. This book is one in which ecclesiology is centered on the word and sacrament. Olson has written a book that might well benefit anyone who is concerned about the current situation of the modernist church program but unsure if there is a future and hope beyond it.

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