

Reviews



QOHELETH: A COMMENTARY, by Thomas Krüger. Translated by O. C. Dean Jr. Edited by Klaus Baltzer. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004. Pp. 306. \$52.00 (cloth).

If there is indeed a “time for every matter under heaven” as Ecclesiastes would have us believe (3:1), then ours appears to be a time for investigating that biblical book. Several significant commentaries on Ecclesiastes have appeared in the last few years. Norbert Lohfink’s *Qoheleth* (A Continental Commentary, Fortress, 2003) is a 158-page translation, updating, and expansion of his commentary, which first appeared in German in 1980. *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes* by Milton P. Horne (Smyth & Helwys, 2003) devotes 578 pages to these two books, with about 200 (including bibliography) focused on Ecclesiastes. Horne’s work includes materials drawn from extra-biblical sources, works of art and photographs, a CD-ROM disk, and a “Connections” section for each pericope, suggesting the text’s contemporary relevance. William Brown’s *Ecclesiastes* in the Interpretation series (2000) is succinct and clearly written, concluding with essays on “Qoheleth’s Place in Christian Faith and Life.” Ellen Davis’s work on Ecclesiastes in *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* in the Westminster Bible Companion (2000) is exceptionally perceptive and fresh. Michael V. Fox’s *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up* (Eerdmans, 1999) provides a Jewish perspective on the book. Choon-Leong Seow’s work in the Anchor Bible (1997) and Roland Murphy’s volume in the Word Biblical Commentary (1992) have become standards. Inserting “Ecclesiastes” into the Google search engine indicates that there are some 350,000 articles and books dealing with

Ecclesiastes. The writer of Ecclesiastes had it right: “Of making many books [insert ‘on Ecclesiastes’] there is no end” (12:12).

Thomas Krüger’s work, published in English in 2004, is the most recent and most thorough commentary on Ecclesiastes. It appeared in German in 2000 as part of the distinguished *Biblischer Kommentar*, a series noted not only for excellent scholarship, but also for theological and practical concern. Professor Klaus Baltzer’s name as volume editor assures the reader that this is a well-informed and carefully produced work. My comments here are based on use of the German edition of the commentary since it appeared, and also on a reading of portions of the new English edition.

The thirty-eight-page introduction begins by suggesting that Ecclesiastes is especially relevant for our time:

The themes treated by the book still address even modern readers directly—or in any case more directly than large portions of the historical sections and prophetic books of the OT. Even if most people in modern “Western” industrial societies no longer work in fields or are subjects of a king, they can relate without great difficulty to the reflections of the book of Qoheleth on work and rest or on behavior vis-à-vis those in power, and they can understand these reflections in terms of their own experiences. (1)

The introduction continues with considerations of themes from Ecclesiastes: “Eating, Drinking, and Pleasure as the Highest Good,” “God and Human Beings,” “Futility and Fleetingness,” “Time and Chance,” “Gain and Portion,” “Work and Toil,” “Wealth and Poverty,” “Power and Dominion,” “Wisdom and Folly.” Follow-

ing this discussion of themes are considerations of “Structure,” “Genres,” “Tensions and Contradictions,” “Origin and Historical Context” (including “Contemporary History,” “Greek Literature and Philosophy,” “Wisdom,” “Torah,” “Eschatology,” “Temple and Cult”), “History of Influence and Reception” (“‘Corpus Salomonicum’ [Proverbs-Qoheleth-Canticles]”), “Jesus Sirach,” “Wisdom of Solomon,” “Other Early Jewish Literature,” “New Testament,” “The Further History of Qoheleth’s Influence,” “Language,” and finally “Text.” The author inserts the following comment after his consideration of Qoheleth’s influence:

...today the book of Qoheleth can perhaps above all serve as an example of an intellectually honest, both well-intentioned and critical, and, not least of all, also self-critical treatment of cultural and religious traditions that is itself not above criticism (nor does it claim to be). (34)

To work through these materials in this introduction is to encounter a summary of the essentials of what Qoheleth is about, and also to be brought up-to-date with current discussion of the book.

The major part of the commentary con-

siders the text of Ecclesiastes, divided into five main sections and framed with a title/motto, motto/epilogue: “Title, Motto” (1:1, 2), “The King and the Wise Man” (1:3–4:12), “The King and the Deity” (4:13–5:8 [5:9]), “Poverty and Wealth” (5:9 [10]–6:9), “Critical Discussion of Conventional Wisdom” (6:10–8:17), “Life in View of Chance and Transitoriness” (9:1–12:7), “Motto, Epilogue” (12:8, 9–14). These sections consider subsections of the book in short essays with titles often pointing to application: “Happiness as the Highest Good Is Not at Our Disposal” (3:10–4:12); “Exhortation to Pleasure and Vigorous Action in View of Death and Chance” (9:1–12); “Advice for Life in View of the Uncertainty of the Future and the Certainty of Death” (11:1–12:7).

The commentary concludes with eighty-seven pages of bibliography and indexes, listing both ancient and modern works.

This English edition is beautifully and carefully produced. The translation is accurate and reads well. This is not only a commentary on the text of Ecclesiastes, but contains enough pointers to other literature to offer the equivalent of a course on this

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somewhat enigmatic but also surprisingly contemporary book. If you wish to purchase or refer to just one book on Ecclesiastes, this is the one.

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MANY THINGS IN PARABLES: JESUS AND HIS MODERN CRITICS, by

Charles W. Hedrick. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox. Pp. 142. \$19.95 (paper).

Forty years ago, preacher and author Ian Macpherson wrote that “a parable often hides the truth until it is too late for the hearer to guard himself against it” (*The Art of Illustrating a Sermon* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1964] 29). Charles Hedrick’s claim about the nature and impact of a parable may lead one to conclude exactly the opposite.

Amidst an impressive and helpful survey of modern critical parables study, Hedrick steadfastly maintains that parables study has been dominated at every turn by a reader-response model of interpretation, in one form or another. Reader-response generates its interpretive force from the interaction of the given reader with the text. For Hedrick, almost every modern interpreter has brought something to the parable’s page that has tended to crowd out the parable itself. Summary interpretations that claim to set forth *the* meaning of the parable violate the “openness of the story,” and on top of that are impossible, as shown by the multiplicity of “definitive” interpretations of any one parable. Hedrick writes:

Much parables study, beginning with the synoptic evangelists, has tended to fall prey to this literary heresy. The summarizing interpretation, the paraphrase, the main point, the theological teaching, and so forth all tend to replace the parable and control how readers experience it. (54)

What is striking about Hedrick’s analysis is

that he applies it equally to modern interpreters and to those whom he identifies as the first interpreters of the parables, the gospel writers. “Much parables study, *beginning with the synoptic evangelists*, has tended to fall prey to this literary heresy.” This may be the most compelling, and for some troubling, feature of Hedrick’s argument. He argues repetitively that the authors of the gospels, by setting the parables of Jesus within their own crafted literary settings, and by providing introductory and summary remarks that are not part of the parable in its pure form, are defining and limiting the parable (see Luke 18:1–8, the parable of the unjust judge, which Hedrick divides as follows: vv. 1, 6–8 form a comparative framework and allegorical association, and vv. 2–5 are the parable itself; for Hedrick only “statements and activities happening within the parameters of the interaction of judge and widow are part of the parable’s world” [12]). The literary context provided by—or perhaps Hedrick might say, *forced upon* the parables by—the gospel setting are just one more reader-response, one that will hinder a fresh reading by the modern reader.

The parables of Jesus, then, are found by Hedrick to be in some sort of “Babylonian captivity.” Every attempt at “interpretation” (a word Hedrick dislikes in the extreme) limits the scope and silences the voice of the parable. “A parable will never speak in its own way as long as it is embedded in a literary context” (90). It is this “embarrassing state of affairs” from which Hedrick seeks to set both the parables and the reader free.

The book is written in two parts. The first section, “Theory,” addresses the history of interpretation through a series of chapters dealing with basic, critical questions: 1. What Is a Parable? The Evidence from the Gospel; 2. Where to Begin? First Steps in Reading the Parables of Jesus; 3. Is Jesus Really the Author of the Parables? The Problem of Sources; 4. Why did Jesus Speak in Parables? Surveying the Literature; 5. What Do Parables Present to the Reader?

Realistic First-Century Fictions; and 6. What Does a Parable Mean? Caveats to Readers of the Parables.

The second section, “Strategies,” reviews both traditional approaches to interpretation in chapter 7—Jesus the Figure Maker: Parable as Allegory, Metaphor, and Symbol; important departures from traditional models in chapters 8 and 9—Jesus the Ethicist: Parable as Moral Lesson and Codification for Social Reform, and Jesus the Existentialist and Bard: Parable as Existential Narrative and Poetic Fiction; and finally, in what is the most provocative chapter—How Does a Parable Resonate? Empowering the Reader—proposes for the reader a guide to engaging the parables in six parts:

1. Separate the parable from its literary context.
2. What is the textual history of the parable?
3. Consider the elements of the story—line by line, word by word.
4. Examine the literary features of the narrative.
5. Hypothetical response(s) of a first-century audience.
6. How does the reader respond to the parable?

The consistent thrust of Hedrick’s work is to see that the parables are allowed to speak for themselves, neither limited in meaning (within a reasonable range of possibilities), nor reduced to moral or theological (another word Hedrick dislikes) teachings. For Hedrick, the parable hides nothing. The parable, read as it would have been heard without literary context or comment, hides nothing. A parable is what it is, and says what it says:

The parable puts all its cards on the table face up, and deliberately conceals nothing: A Farmer is a farmer, a weed is a weed, a fig tree is a fig tree, a steward is a steward, a type of soil is a type of soil, and so on. (53)

The difficulty for Hedrick is that if the images and figures in the parables are applied in-

allegorically or theologically, both the sense of the story itself and the character of the persons (human and divine) depicted often seem to suffer. For this reason, the parables must be separated from the context in which we find them, and freed to stand alone. Then,

[w]e are left with parables, which make good sense when read as stories, but poor sense if the object is to find theological or allegorical messages in them. In the main, the parables are thoroughly secular and realistic slices of first-century Palestinian life. (35)

For Hedrick, this is the essence of the parable, that it is a story without a single message, without a pressing theological agenda or setting, just a story that the reader is invited to engage with and respond to.

While I found myself disagreeing quite frequently with Hedrick’s conclusions, and wishing at certain points that his argument was more fully developed, I found his book both provocative and engaging. The survey of history of interpretation he provides, albeit through a very specific and focused lens, alone is worth the price of the book.

Hedrick’s articulation of the fact that every reader brings a certain set of issues and preconceptions to the reading of a text is helpful, and his suggestion that this baggage be set aside is well taken. Pushing that hermeneutical crux a step further, and urging a separation of parable-story from gospel-setting is at once provocative and troubling. For the preacher, or for the Christian layperson, the setting of the parable in the life and teaching of Jesus within the gospels is likely to be critical. Hedrick would have done well to return, after urging and modeling the separation, to a reengagement of the question of what significance the parable may or may not have, coming from the lips of Jesus in the heart of a gospel. Is it important that it is Jesus, whom the gospels identify as the Son of God, the Christ, who tells these seemingly “secular and realistic” stories? How is the tension between context and content to be faithfully engaged, while at the same time critically in-

vestigated? Such questions were, it seems, beyond Hedrick's field of inquiry, but will certainly be of central importance to the Christian reader of the parables.

Many things in Hedrick's book are worthy of a careful and critical read. The pastor may find within these pages a valuable and challenging conversation partner, as she prepares to join the ranks of interpreters and preach and teach the parables that Jesus taught and preached.

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO MARTIN LUTHER, edited by Donald K. McKim. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. 320. \$60.00 (cloth).

Works designed to introduce Martin Luther to us abound. If you do not already own one, many publishers are happy to help you fill this lacuna. This work, part of the prolific "Cambridge Companion" series, is best suited for those desiring a scholarly rather than a popular introduction to the Reformer. Its eighteen essays, by North American and German academics, are arranged into four sections: Luther's life and context, Luther's work, after Luther, and Luther today. Essays range from eleven to thirty-four pages; most include endnotes. Inevitably, some topics and themes overlap.

Part one, "Luther's Life and Context," offers essays on "Luther's Life" (Albrecht Beutel) and "Luther's Wittenberg" (Helmar Junghans). The essays in section two—"Luther's Work"—comprise over half of the work. The section begins with an excellent essay on "Luther's Writings" by the late Timothy Lull. Observing that "The great pleasure of reading Luther is complicated by several problems. The greatest of these is the sheer mass of material" (39), the essay lists what writings are available in English, then proceeds to categorize them under eighteen themes, listing the most important

writings on each theme and directing the reader to where they are in the English-language *Luther's Works*. For anyone starting to read Luther—or for anyone seeking orientation to a particular issue—this is a most helpful essay. While noting, "It takes a few years of study to gain a comprehensive overview," Lull adds, "in a few months one may come to know some of Luther's most important writings and explore his ideas" (58). Oswald Bayer's fine short essay, "Luther as an Interpreter of Holy Scripture," presents Luther's understanding of the word as public and active: "God's truth and will are not abstract attributes, but that which is orally and publicly related as concrete words of comfort to a particular hearer in a particular situation" (77). In the longest essay, "Luther's Theology," Markus Wriedt rejects attempts to put Luther's theology into a dogmatic framework or to assemble Luther's works into an historical order. After examining Luther's Reformation discovery Wriedt organizes his essay around concrete conflicts to which Luther responded.

Fred Meuser's essay on "Luther as Preacher of the Word of God" should be required reading for all Lutheran preachers. Meuser highlights Luther's certainty that the preached word was the saving event and not just a preliminary to the sacraments. Preaching, for Luther, was centered in the text, but "everything he knew about Christ had a way of creeping into his treatment of almost any text" (139). Luther saw preaching God's word as part of the battle between God and evil. External form, beauty of language, and polish mattered little to him. Importantly, Meuser also notes how Luther became discouraged and was tempted to quit, yet recovered from these struggles. The essay summarizes nicely key points from Meuser's scholarly work on the topic. Carter Lindberg (Luther's struggle with social-ethical issues), David Whitford (Luther's political encounters), and Mark U. Edwards, Jr. (Luther's polemical controversies) also summarize in their essays the extensive work that each has done on these themes.

Part three, "After Luther," contains three essays by Robert Kolb, Hans Hillerbrand, and James Nestingen that examine the influence, understanding, misunderstanding, uses, and misuses of Luther from his own time until today. While Kolb focuses on the sixteenth-century reception of Luther, Hillerbrand spans the sixteenth to twentieth centuries. Nestingen's essay, "Approaching Luther," provides useful orientation to Luther studies today, noting, among other things, English editions, characteristic features of Luther's writing, and relevant secondary literature.

"Luther Today," part four of the work, contains essays by the late James Kittelson ("Luther and Modern Church History"), Robert Jenson ("Luther's Contemporary Theological Significance"), and Guenther Gassmann ("Luther in the Worldwide Church Today"). All three deal with how Luther is or could be used in the church today; all three raise some of the most controversial issues in the volume. Kittelson argues that the care of souls (*cura animarum*), not the church as such, is the hermeneutic by which to understand Luther's life and works. This intense concern for the care of souls shapes how Luther sees the church's earthly existence, its patterns of worship, and its ministry. Explicitly and implicitly, Kittelson refutes those who attempt to appropriate Luther for their contemporary ecumenical agendas, particularly those who claim Luther's central purpose was to reform the Roman Church. Robert Jenson lists the aspects of Luther's theology most likely to further the contemporary theological enterprise as *communicatio idiomatum*, *genus maiestaticum*, *Deus absconditus*, *theosis*, and *perspicuitas*, but fails to note, for example, the controversy surrounding whether in fact Luther had a notion of theosis. Gassmann discusses the twentieth-century Luther renaissance, the new Roman Catholic view of Luther, and the ecumenical movement as developments that helped free Luther from a German Lutheran captivity and make his insights available to the worldwide church. Though Luther certainly has become for the worldwide church

"a model of faith and source of information," Gassmann fails to note that Luther's insights are still (rightly or wrongly) controversial in many respects.

The quality of the essays is uneven and their accessibility to nonspecialists varies. The prose of some essays is less than felicitous. Some essays hamper their own usefulness by failing to include references to the American edition of Luther's works. One could question some of the themes assigned—would Luther have spoken of his "spiritual journey" ("Luther's Spiritual Journey," by Jane Strohl) or of his "moral theology" ("Luther's Moral Theology," by Bernd Wannewetsch)?

Though in many respects the essays in this work offer useful orientation, the nonspecialist reader seeking basic introduction to Luther will probably want to start elsewhere. James Kittelson's *Luther the Reformer* offers a fine short biographical introduction. Bernhard Lohse's two books, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Fortress, 1999) and *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Augsburg Fortress, 1986), offer introduction to theological themes and issues in Luther research.

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CONFESSING JESUS CHRIST: PREACHING IN A POST-MODERN WORLD,

by David J. Lose. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. Pp. 264. \$27.00 (paper).

In this spirited work, David Lose describes the current crisis in thought, thus in theology and proclamation, prepares a critical response, and outlines the implications of his response for preaching.

According to Lose, the crisis is twofold. It consists, first, in the collapse of the "modernist" view, of its optimism over one's ability to describe reality and over words as having referents beyond themselves. In theology, this view has underlain

the historical-critical method with its unearthing of facts to legitimize the biblical message. This method's assumption of an objective and value-free reality open to discovery, together with the exercise of power that it invokes, renders it outdated but also patriarchal. Second, the crisis consists in a "postmodernist" reaction, in a view of reality as shifting in response to changing perceptions and convictions. In theology, this view is reflected in references to "truth" or "Word of God" as such only among those who hold it to be so. The assumption of this "antifoundationalist" adherence to reality as limited to context or perspective, and its restricting of the Bible to its own "semiotic universe," cripples conviction, and rules out the possibility of cross-contextual conversation.

To this modernist-postmodernist "stand-off" author Lose responds in "postfoundational," "realistic," or "pragmatic" fashion. With an assist from current speech-act theory, represented for example by J. L. Austin and John Searle, he describes the biblical text as "performative," that is, as not merely *saying* but as *doing* something, hence as confession. Confession, Lose argues, is the most apt term for describing truth in our time, since it avoids the total certainty sought by the rationalist as well as the isolationism of the postmodernist. In fact, it represents the pattern found in the New Testament. Proceeding to its biblical, theological elements, Lose first concludes that confession gives expression to the essential Christian tradition, at the heart of which is the proclamation of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that discrete frame of reference by which believers may interpret every aspect of their life in the world. Second, confession yields a "critical space" in which encounter between the word proclaimed and the hearer can take place, thus guaranteeing the hearer's integrity. With this understanding of confession as hermeneutical key Lose finds Paul Ricoeur's dialectic of understanding as participation and distanciation most compatible. He thus can describe the biblical texts as "inherently and unabashedly referential" without commit-

ting the "grave category error" of those who construe reality as residing exclusively with the human community, but at the same time, contrary to modernist totalization, he can allow for the proclamation's vulnerability, a corollary of God's self-disclosure in the cross of Christ and the believer's existential struggle. Thus, preaching as confession, as "assertive," may not yield validation, but it can function as the catalytic by which faith (or unbelief) may occur. As Lose frequently insists, confession in the context of speech-act theory neither reflects the permanence sought by modernists nor the lack of it trumpeted by postmodernists. It rather furnishes a level of "dialogical realism" that allows speaking of "truth" and "Word of God" with integrity.

Lose believes this period of the postmodernist "assault" may leave greater room for religious belief or speech than the era of foundationalism, since it urges Christians to clarify the essential nature of their faith, to live apart from rationally guaranteed foundations, but at the same time to make intelligible witness to their faith.

This book is surely reminiscent of earlier attempts at matching the biblical message to the current scene. Once upon a time, Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of *Dasein* occupied the place with Rudolf Bultmann which speech-act theory now occupies with Lose as vehicle for conveying the good news. And Bultmann was no "foundationalist," questing for certainty, nor a "maximal fideist," disallowing referentiality and cross-contextual conversation. (That, curiously, best describes Karl Barth, who with all his talk of "translation" and the preacher's need to hold the Bible in one hand and the paper in the other [cf. page 124] was so opposed to any point of contact between the gospel and its hearer, that he neared slandering Bultmann for his attempt to render the kerygma relevant). Further, whereas Bultmann insisted that such address could not create encounter between God and the hearer, but merely set the scene for it, his fascination with the facility of his construct sometimes got the better of him. Lose states that his position does not imply

that the preacher validates the message; “only God can do that,” he writes (110). But when he states that “words of the Bible only take on meaning when they are viewed both in relation to the narratives in which they are used and in relation to the common words of the hearers as they go about their daily lives” (123; cf. 184), his usual demurrer at the notion of the vehicle as validation seems muted.

Just as vulnerable, perhaps, as Bultmann’s notion of the “aggravatedly modern man” may be Lose’s notion of the currency of the postmodern assault. With the exception of the French, perhaps, there is still a host across the Atlantic that has not entirely jettisoned historical-critical research, albeit conceding its faults, and in English-speaking climes “logo-centrists” still exist. George Steiner, for example, who is usually omitted from our conversation but may be one of the most provocative thinkers of our time, argues that because there is a God words have referents beyond themselves. But Steiner is not a Gentile.

Lose is a preacher concerned for the gospel of Jesus Christ and its audience. Such persons are rare now, as are their teachers and publishers. Our pastors need this book.

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SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS: A CALL TO RELIGIOUS REVOLUTION IN AMERICA, by Sven Erlandson. Lincoln, NE: Writer’s Showcase, 2000. Pp. 452. \$21.95 (paper).

Sven Erlandson minces no words in his bold and honest critique of the Christian church in America. His problem statement is clear: How is it that we live in a society in which people are hungry for all things spiritual and yet the church all too often is unable to connect with those who are seeking God? The power of this book is that it offers an “insiders” perspective. It is not written by an academic from the “ivory tower,” but

a person who lives with those who are spiritual but not religious (SBNR). It is also the honest story of his own search for God and how the church has both helped and hindered that relationship. The author makes it clear that he loves God’s church. The church has the answer, the gift of God’s love and grace, of which the world is desperately in need. At the same time, there is much that deeply disturbs and disappoints him. The author begins by defining those who are SBNR and what has created this phenomenon in the United States. He then provides a critique of the church, addressing seven “secrets” regarding why the church fails to reach the SBNR—often in very candid language.

A strength of Erlandson’s book is that he does not simply stop at shining a light on the church’s dark places and exposing its shortcomings. He takes the bold step of challenging both those who are SBNR and the church in America. First, he clearly states that the SBNR mind-set is not enough. It falls short because it is not a solution-centered movement. It identifies the problems within organized religion and provides a movement of transition, but fails to make a movement toward spiritual fulfillment, which can only be found in relationships nurtured within Christian community. Second, he provides a clear vision for the church and lays out a strategy for creating a needed revolution within the church, a revolution that will transform the church in such a way that it will be able to present the good news of God’s love in ways that will address people’s felt needs and deepest longings and, thus, bring the gift of God’s love to those who are SBNR.

Spiritual but Not Religious clearly relates the ideas Erlandson is attempting to communicate. Yet, for all its strengths, the book has three weaknesses. First, the editor should be chastised for sloppy work. There are grammatical errors, repetition, poor organization of chapters and captions, and minor factual errors. (When Erlandson updates and publishes this book again, and I hope he does, he should find another editor and publisher.) Second, the absence of ref-

erences and footnotes is problematic. Documentation and a bibliography would provide the reader with the opportunity for further study and give the author a more firm foundation on which to build his thesis. Third, and most importantly, Erlandson takes his critique of Christian theology too far, primarily by discrediting (the need for) the resurrection of Jesus. Although, in part, his critique of “nonsensical theology” has much validity, he robs the gospel of the power which is its “good news.” If the SBNR can believe that God is creator of the universe, then believing in the literal resurrection of Christ is not a “leap of faith” but a tiny step of hope.

I highly recommend this book for all church leaders, particularly pastors, bishops, seminary students, and professors. It is a perfect complement to such books as George Hunter’s *How to Reach Secular People* and *Church for the Unchurched*; *Church Without Walls*, by Jim Peterson; *Evangelism That Works*, by George Barna; *Becoming a Contagious Church*, by Mark Mittelberg; and the like.

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