

ROMANS IN FULL CIRCLE: A HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION, by Mark Reasoner. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005. Pp. xxvi + 194. \$24.95 (paper).

Recent years have witnessed a rising tide of interest among Protestants in the history of biblical interpretation, especially as practiced in the early church. Supporters of this trend will enthusiastically welcome *Romans in Full Circle*, a wonderful new book by Mark Reasoner, associate professor of biblical studies at Bethel University, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

As the book's title suggests, it is about the various ways Paul's epistle to the Romans has been interpreted through nearly two millennia of Christian history. By covering such a vast sweep of time and focusing on a single epistle, a very different sort of book emerges than the more conventional history of interpretation (e.g., Stephen Neill's classic, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1986*). Perhaps *Romans in Full Circle* will become a model for others. Many have noted how the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series, edited by Thomas Oden, has not lived up to the high hopes it originally inspired. The various glosses included are too superficial and too poorly digested to produce truly significant theological insight. No one will make similar complaints of this book. While relatively few words of the commentators are presented, their voices come through loud and clear.

The methodology employed is straightforward. Twelve key passages from Romans have been selected. They are: 1:16–17; 1:19–21; 3:21–28; 5:12; 5:18–21; 7:7–8:4; 8:28–30; 9:16–19; 9:20–23; 10:4; 11:25–27; and 13:1–7. Distinctive exegeses of these key loci by key interpreters are then highlighted, and the implications and historical fallout of their distinctive approaches assessed. Greatest prominence is given to the comments of Origen, Augustine, Abelard, Aquinas, Luther, Barth, partisans of “the new perspective” exemplified by W. D. Davies, E. P. Sanders, and J. D. G. Dunn, and “narrative-based approaches” exemplified

particularly by N. T. Wright and A. Katherine Grieb. Many others play more modest roles.

The book has a clever title. The multivalent phrase “full circle” refers first to Paul's claim in Rom 15:19 to “have fulfilled the gospel of Christ in the circle from Jerusalem to Illyricum.” Second, it refers to a trajectory of interpretation that over the centuries like a boomerang has taken exegetes great distances from the interpretations of early commentators such as Origen, but more recently has been heading back towards the original (or should I say “Origen-al”) starting point. The third meaning of “full circle” puts a finer point on the second. Origen read the book unaware of Reformation debates about “law and grace” or “forensic justification.” Instead of a timeless treatise on systematic theology, Origen considered Romans a piece of pastoral diplomacy, an attempt by Paul in a specific context to arbitrate between Jewish believers and Gentile believers, who each had staked a claim to the faith but whose Christian experience differed greatly. The goal was to keep Christian Jew and Christian Gentile working together. In today's world a new tension is emerging within the church. “Southern Christianity”—located in Asia, Africa, and Latin America—increasingly offers a challenge to the dominant position of European and North American Christianity, just as Gentile Christianity challenged the domination of Jewish Christianity in the first century. As the church's center of gravity moves south, reading Romans as pastoral diplomacy gains renewed resonance. In this sense, Romans is moving full circle among the many nations of the earth.

Reasoner dedicated this book to two of his professors at the University of Chicago, who also happen to be academic giants: the Pauline specialist Hans Dieter Betz, and the Patristics scholar Robert M. Grant. The influence of both is displayed in dazzling brilliance throughout the book: Reasoner is fully conversant with the rich debate that has characterized recent scholarship on Romans, but he also brings an uncommon level of insight and contextual awareness to

the ancient, medieval, Reformation, and modern commentaries he unpacks. His analysis of both Origen and Augustine—who read Romans so differently from each other—is especially fruitful. He avoids interpreting Origen by means of easy stereotypes, and carefully traces important changes in interpretation that emerge as Augustine ages and faces new foes.

For a book focused on texts, *Romans in Full Circle* is remarkably theological. In our compartmentalized world, works on “biblical studies” and “theology” are classified as separate species. Yet as Reasoner and the commentators he presents wrestle with the meaning of the text, the theological implications are always in the air. Reading this book reminded me of my first encounter with Barth’s *Römerbrief*, a “commentary” (i.e., an artifact of “biblical studies”) that is now often considered the most important “theological” work of the twentieth century.

Reasoner notes that “it is impossible to be neutral on Romans” (ix). He does not avoid the pointed comment, but in general the tone is irenic and charitable to all. Lutherans may buck at one of the central themes of *Romans in Full Circle*, the now common observation that since the sixteenth century exegetes have not been able to read Romans with their sight unrestricted by Reformation blinders. In particular, Reasoner rejects Luther’s assertion that “the righteousness of faith” (Rom 4:11, 13) must be Christ’s “passive righteousness” forensically credited to believers apart from works (32). Rather, he sides with Origen, who lived before the age of Augustinian/Reformation blinders, and therefore “correctly saw that ‘faith’ for Paul includes good works” (32).

This book was written so it could serve as a textbook, but it has a much broader application. Pastors and preachers will find it particularly helpful.

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STUDIES IN MATTHEW, by Ulrich Luz.
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. Pp. 382.
\$35.00 (paper).

Ulrich Luz, author of this volume of eighteen chapters on Matthew, has become the foremost exegete of that gospel, with his magisterial three-volume commentary now completed in the Hermeneia series (Fortress). Luz is professor emeritus of New Testament at the University of Bern, Switzerland, and these essays represent his attempt to understand Matthew as a historical and theological gospel, along with helpful reflections on hermeneutical issues of biblical interpretation in times of religious pluralism. While these studies demonstrate the depth and profundity of a master exegete, they are written with the clarity and passion of one who has understood and responded, too. The topics cover the basic themes of christology, ecclesiology, ethics, miracles, and Matthew’s anti-Judaism, with a bonus regarding the significance of the church fathers for interpretation. Rather than attempt a survey of the multiple themes, I will focus on four chapters that are particularly relevant for teachers and pastors.

In chapter one, Luz attempts a historical survey of the community to which Matthew writes and of which he is the representative. The setting is a Jewish-Christian community now living in Syria. Its mission to Israel has failed and it has suffered persecution and expulsion from the synagogue. In this new setting, after the tragic events of A.D. 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the Matthean community now sees its primary mission to reach out to Gentiles in the name of the exalted Lord (28:16–20).

Luz finds the gospel to have a dual setting. It retells the story of Jesus found in Mark and Q, along with Matthew’s own additions of the presence of God as Immanuel in the birth stories and throughout Jesus’ ministry until his death and exaltation. Alongside this retold story of Jesus, Luz hears another story of the community’s own traumatic experiences of rejection and

its resultant harsh judgment on Israel and its leaders. While one does find this dual story helpful in understanding Matthew, there were times I found it questionable and overstated.

Chapter ten deals with a central motif in the gospel: the fulfillment of the law in Matthew. Here one can only be in awe at the way Luz interprets Matt. 5:17–20 and its relationship to the Antithesis of the Sermon on the Mount. He argues that for Matthew, the Torah still has its rightful place, yet the one commandment to love has the highest priority, and the teaching of Jesus is the authoritative interpretation of the law.

Luz then asks whether there is an unbridgeable chasm between Matthew and Paul in their understanding of the law. For Matthew, the problem of antinomianism in his community, and the conflict with the synagogue and its rejection of Jesus' authority, lead to his upholding of the law rightly understood. For Paul, the experience of failure under the law and his Damascus encounter with Christ led to his faith in the God now revealed in Christ. Paul focuses more on becoming a Christian and Matthew on remaining a Christian. But at the center of their faith is christology, the belief that Christ is the new revealer of the will of God both in the Old and New Testaments. While for Paul freedom from the law is an expression of grace alone, Matthew sees grace as obedience to the commandments. In this sense, Luz suggests that Matthew can be a corrective to a misinterpretation of Paul that ignores practice and obedience as signs of faith.

In chapter twelve Luz discusses, with painful openness, the topic of anti-Judaism in the gospel of Matthew ("Historical and Theological Problem"). He interprets Matthew 21–28 as the climax of Jesus' conflict with Israel, and in contrast to Eduard Schweizer and other commentators views the Matthean Jesus as ending his mission to Israel and pronouncing final judgment on Israel for rejecting Jesus and his messengers. He interprets this with sociological models of "sibling conflict," in which the conflict is most intense between those clos-

est (not only "mother-daughter" but "rival siblings"). Luz acknowledges there was persecution and even some martyrdom from Jewish leaders, yet agrees such were rare and pre-A.D. 70, and limited to active missionaries.

He then briefly summarizes five attempts to exonerate Matthew's anti-Judaism, with his responses pro and con. Luz himself ends up not being able to exonerate Matthew, arguing that while Jesus himself still offered Israel an opportunity to repent, Matthew goes beyond Jesus in his harsh judgments on Israel's refusal to believe and to repent, and this is now in our canon.

While I can only be in sympathy with the sad history of denial and persecution as part of the interpretation of Matthew's gospel ("his blood be on us and our children," 27:25), I do not find Luz's response satisfactory. The question is one of christology and Jesus' claims for himself. It has been the Christian claim through the centuries that Jesus is the unique representative of God, the promised Messiah of the Scriptures. Isn't it still possible to make this absolute claim for Jesus without hostility and hatred and prejudice and denial within the family circle of "Jews and Christians"? I think so. Luz does agree that there is no need to try and rewrite those portions of Matthew and other New Testament texts deemed anti-Judaic, since the task is nigh-impossible and distorts the canon.

The final chapter raises the question of the "Significance of Matthew's Jesus Story for Today." This is a wise and challenging message for the contemporary church. At the heart of Matthew's story is the presence of Jesus as "Immanuel," through whom God is present to the "end of the age" (28:20). The five great discourses of the Gospel are addressed by Jesus to his followers. They are the "gospel of the kingdom" that Jesus proclaimed; the Sermon on the Mount in particular reiterates the substance of what is to be proclaimed (28:20). While recognizing that Jesus "Immanuel" is the gift of grace at the center of the story, Luz rightly notes that the Matthean "gospel of the kingdom" consists primarily of "im-

peratives” that make huge demands on humanity and the church.

The command to love reaches out even to the world of politics, with its demand to love the enemy. And the marks of the church depicted in Matthew are “authority, obedience, poverty, suffering, infinite readiness to forgive and love” (379). What is not in mind, Luz says boldly, are hierarchical structures of the Roman Catholic Church or the empty institutional shells of European Protestant churches. Something more akin to monastic or radical Reformation or base communities best coheres with Matthew’s Jesus community.

I will do no more than note other key topics in this volume: the primacy saying of Matt 16 where the “papal” interpretation is shown to be post-Easter and late; the debate over “academic” and “ecclesial” exegesis; the importance of the church fathers for biblical interpretation; the question of “truth” in interpretation; and many others. But hopefully enough has been said here to lure the busy pastor to attend to this volume, especially when preaching on Matthew.

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**GOD IS NOT GREAT: HOW RELIGION
POISONS EVERYTHING**, by Christopher Hitchens. New York: 12 Hachette Book Group U.S.A., 2007. Pp. 307. \$24.99 (cloth).

God Is Not Great is an all-out, no-holds-barred assault on religion—all religion. Christopher Hitchens is an equal opportunity atheist—he doesn’t believe in anything that smacks remotely of the religious, the faith-based, or the spiritually minded, be it Judeo-Christian, Muslim, Aztec, or other. Hitchens’s contention is simply, consistently, aggressively this: all religion is bad, every religion equally guilty of deceiving humankind and poisoning the world. Hitchens, who has made his mark primarily as a political and literary purveyor of opin-

ion, may be complimented for his cleverness and his witty (and often wicked) turn of phrase, and thanked for bringing to bear some relevant and important questions. At the same time there are points at which Hitchens is given to an overly nasty tone that makes his basic argument hard to stick with and, most glaringly, points at which his arrogance and ignorance combine in a spectacular mess.

It would probably do little good to argue faith and Scripture with Hitchens—he will not be convinced; disclaimers notwithstanding (9), his unbelief is heartfelt and creedal (5). And it is probably not necessary to do so simply to satisfy the choir. But there is certainly value in entertaining the criticisms and concerns of one who holds a different and in this case opposing worldview.

Following the provocative spirit of the book's title, the chapter titles are perhaps the best part of the work; they are clever, evocative, and interesting (e.g., chap. 3: "A Short Digression on the Pig; or, Why Heaven Hates Ham," or chap. 10: "The Tawdriness of the Miraculous and the Decline of Hell"). Unfortunately the titles are usually the best parts of any given chapter, with the body not living up to the head. In large part this is due to the negative and almost spiteful tone to which Hitchens constantly resorts.

One can only describe certain portions of the book as "addled." At times his line of writing is difficult to follow, not because it is complex or particularly deep but because it is convoluted and almost stream-of-consciousness. The result is that Hitchens's position resolves into a naked prejudice against the religious. This prejudice seems based on a fundamental misunderstanding of religion and an almost fundamentalistic rejection of it. For example, Hitchens makes religion claim: "Not just to know, but to know everything" (10), a claim that the Bible, at any rate, does not support. He also makes numerous bald statements, without substantive example, evidence, or proofs, such as that religion forces one to choose dogmatics and trust over against doubt and experiment (278), another posi-

tion the Bible simply does not reflect. Or, "clearly, the human species is designed to experiment with sex" (54). This begs two simple questions: What does Hitchens mean by "designed" when he contends that there is no designer (8)? and What is it that makes the case so "clearly"? Or, "belief among astronomers and physicists has become private and fairly rare" (70; has he asked them all?); or "the pitiless teachings of the god of Moses...never mention human solidarity and compassion at all" (100; *never?*)—and these are but a few. Ironically, his intentionally incendiary statements are provided no real fuel.

Hitchens is also prone to proof-quoting—that sinister sibling of proof-texting—where one uses only a portion of what someone has said in order to make them sound just the way they need to in order to make one's point. Just one example is his quotation of Luther at the head of chapter five. The quotation (*LW* 40:175, which Hitchens fails to reference), "Reason is the Devil's harlot, who can do naught but slander and harm whatever God says and does," is a tacit characterization of Luther's point—that reason is to be avoided—that is both inaccurate and misleading. Perhaps this is why he fails to provide a citation.

Hitchens is also wrong on two other, similar fronts. He characterizes Bonhoeffer as "an admirable but nebulous humanist" (7), "who acted in accordance only with the dictates of conscience" (241); he then describes Martin Luther King Jr. as "in no real sense a Christian" (176). His case for these conclusions is never fully laid out, but one may conclude that a religious person who is in any way admirable cannot safely be praised until they have first been safely secularized. Here we see the weakness and bias of the book's perspective.

Hitchens does level several important criticisms of religion that ought to be considered carefully. He holds in contempt the suggestion that while religion and its claims may not be true they may still be held onto as beneficial and comforting (5); at best this is lukewarm religion, and this poor-person's version of Pascal's wager needs

spitting out. And he points out that religion “may speak about the bliss of the next world, but wants power in this one” (17). This is too often true, and fair warning to all who exercise spiritual authority, whether in the national picture or in the lives of individuals in their care. And finally, he notes that “the attitude of religion to medicine, like the attitude of religion to science, is always problematic and very often necessarily hostile” (46–47). With questions such as stem cell research and the beginnings and endings of life this is certainly true and an important consideration for the religious.

Hitchens asks tough questions and levels some fair accusations against religion. His basic problem lies in his assumption that religion poisons absolutely; while it is true that the uses to which religion is sometimes put are problematic and even dangerous, this is not *necessarily* the case. In his eagerness either to titillate or to attack Hitchens resorts to the extreme—extreme examples, hyper-rhetoric, and gleefully nasty cleverness. This makes for an often engaging, occasionally amusing, and frequently disturbing read, but ultimately a weak and unconvincing case. In short, this book, which had such potential both in terms of its contribution to broader conversations around religion that need to take place in American culture and in bringing objective reflection to bear on any number of issues critical to the modern church, was not great, and was in fact disappointing in almost everything.

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CONVERSATIONS WITH POPPI ABOUT GOD, by Robert W. Jenson and Solveig Lucia Gold. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006. Pp.158. \$18.99 (hardbound).

In this book Robert Jenson takes on the classic dialogue style. He and his eight-year-old granddaughter discussed theology and recorded the conversations over a period of time, and then turned them into this book. While they discuss a wide range of

topics, it may be that the most important points in this book are not explicit but implicit. Each of the theologian authors wrote an introduction to the book. Gold explains that she asked her “Poppi” a theological question and received an answer that encouraged her to ask more questions. Eventually they used a tape recorder for their conversations. She explains her rationale for asking Poppi thus:

By the way, the reason I asked Poppi the question to begin with is because he is the Reverend Canon Professor Dr. D. Robert W. Jenson, B.A., B.D., M.A., D.Theol., D.H.L., D.D. You might have noticed what a rather long title that is. Well, all I can say is that it goes along with his lengthy replies. (7)

It seems clear that his titles are only part of the reason for asking Poppi. The other and probably more important reason is that he is Poppi. She is asking her grandfather, whom she knows, loves, and trusts. This point reminds us that the primary theologians in most children’s lives are loved and trusted adults. This inquisitive child did not go to her pastor first; she went to her grandfather, who just happens to be a world-renowned theologian. Most children do not have famous theologians for grandparents, so church professionals may want to think about how to equip theologically all those adults concerned to explore with children the wonders of God, the church, creation, and all points theological.

Another point comes from the second introduction, by Robert Jenson:

In the conversations, I did not think I should immediately correct every theological or historical error, Solveig’s or mine, though some of mine are embarrassing. Nor have I done so now. (10)

If Robert Jenson, a world-renowned theologian, is free to make errors in his discussions with his granddaughter, then perhaps we should be a little less concerned about always getting it exactly right. The thing about faith training is that it is lifelong. While he acknowledges some errors, since he has a life relationship with Solveig the conversations can continue and he can,

over time, make any corrections he deems necessary.

While the dialogue structure makes the book wander a bit from time to time, that wandering nature sounds true to life. Thoughtful kids ask thoughtful questions and their minds are often going six ways at once. That is reflected in the book. For example, a discussion on time machines leads to a discussion of obedience to rules.

Topics they discussed ranged from creation through speculations on the nature of heaven and hell. They discussed angels, Bible stories, sacramental practices, the nature of God, church history, creeds, the devil, Santa Claus, and a plethora of other things.

One topic that seemed to recur was the nature of the Holy Spirit.

P: God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, is God's liveliness. When we say someone is lively, we don't mean they jump up and down all by themselves, but that they get other people involved. Right?

S: Right. I'm begging you, come over here. It's wonderful. Celebrate!

P: So you talk about a sports team having spirit.

S: Right. And that's when they drink the one big bottle together.

P: Right! If a sports team didn't have a common spirit, they wouldn't have any fun playing together, and they wouldn't play very well, either. The quarterback in the football game has to know where the people he wants to catch the ball are going to be; there has to be a kind of wordless communication between them, a common liveliness, a common goal.

S: So we need a common goal to be happy.

P: Exactly. So the Spirit is God's liveliness. Now, there is another point, and this is this complicated one. If I am lively, my liveliness is not itself a person.

S: No, your *liveliness* is the spirit.

P: But in God's case, his liveliness is God all over again.

S: Right: And...

P: That makes three. There is Jesus and his Father and...

S: Their liveliness. Father, Son and Spirit. (38-39)

The static concreteness of this explanation leaves me uncomfortable. This may say more about our temperaments than it does about theology, but it was a theme that kept recurring throughout the book and which I found jarring. That said, I think his explanation of the origins of Christianity and his explanation of why there are so many kinds of Christians were very well done. He gives a good explanation of indulgences and the conflict between Luther and Calvin and the Pope. It is a nice, age-appropriate explanation that comes out of the dialogue. It demonstrates the importance and the rewards of having conversations rather than simple lectures. Solveig is able to get her particular question answered and they are able to make connections and clarifications as they go.

Overall, the greatest value of the book may be in demonstrating the warmth and excitement of having theological conversations with children. It offers a glimpse of a way to teach the faith that is ancient, and new.

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THE PASTOR: A SPIRITUALITY, by Gordon W. Lathrop. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006. Pp. 141. \$20.00 (hardcover).

I recently attended a conference where, as usual, many books were on display. There were the serious academic books. There were the multivolume series, presenting a variety of subjects under a familiar banner. There were the lighthearted, even humorous, titles. There were the earnest titles that set out to explain yet another new paradigm. And then there was a small, unassuming volume with an arrestingly straightforward title: *The Pastor: A Spirituality*. I found myself circling back to this modest, simple book more than a few times on consecutive days, and finally decided to give in to its gravitational pull. I am glad I did.

The title of his most recent venture is

straightforward and simple, Lathrop writes, because he hopes “that the book will be found to be relatively simple.” He longs, he writes, “for it to be an homage of respect, a profound bow, to faithful pastors and to those who struggle to know what faithfulness may be in such a time as this” (vii).

Unlike many of the other books available at that conference, Lathrop’s volume is not complicated theologically. It does not attempt at humor or jollity. It does not receive its validation as part of a larger series, but is meant to stand on its own. And, as Lathrop readily admits, there is nothing particularly new or novel about it. Conceding his conscious dependence on and indebtedness to many earlier works, Lathrop expresses his appreciation particularly for “the remarkable *Country Parson* by the seventeenth-century Anglican pastor and poet, George Herbert” (ix). He also explicitly acknowledges the “many, many pastors through the ages who have also tried to articulate the vocation” (x).

While accepting and celebrating this dependence on those who have gone before, Lathrop nevertheless believes it is worth articulating afresh some of what they were trying to say about the pastoral vocation “now, at this moment, for today’s pastors” (x). To do this, Lathrop chooses to structure his book around “the catechism—the ancient baptismal texts—and the short list of the pastor’s tasks” (18). By catechism, Lathrop is speaking of the classically understood “set of symbolic, largely liturgical texts—the Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and a few texts central to the sacraments—that can stand for larger moments of Christian faith and practice” (16). The “short list of the pastor’s tasks,” which Lathrop takes from Justin Martyr, comprises preaching, table serving, and remembering the poor. This “simple list of the presider’s three tasks” (18) makes up the first half of the book, with a chapter devoted to each task. They are set up by an introductory chapter on “The Pastor in Preparing to Preside,” which takes as its starting point the Lord’s Prayer.

In each of the three chapters that follow,

Lathrop reflects on how a pastor might spend a lifetime preparing for these three central tasks of pastoral leadership. These chapters on preaching, the sacraments, and remembering the poor are thoughtful reflections grounded solidly in the biblical witness and rich tradition and wisdom of Christians who have preceded us, while also offering gentle and caring practical advice throughout. Each of these chapters—like all of the book’s chapters—ends with a personal reflection or story from Lathrop’s own life as a pastor. Explaining these interludes in the introduction, he notes that “you may choose to skip these passages” (viii). I’m not sure why anyone would, though, since these italicized counterpoints to the main text bring to life what Lathrop writes about by making it personal, specific, and concrete.

If the first half of the book is about the pastor’s tasks primarily as a leader of the liturgy, then the second half of the book is designed to help the pastor take “patterns from this common prayer of the assembly for the reorientation of his or her ordinary life as a believer, walking in the world” (18). In this half, Lathrop dedicates a chapter each to “Study and Prayer,” “Daily Living,” and “The Pastor in Dying.”

Lathrop calls the second half of the book “Living from the Liturgy: A Little Catechism for the Pastor.” Here he returns again more explicitly to the classical catechism, framing the chapter on study and prayer around the creed, the chapter on daily living around the Ten Commandments, and the chapter on dying around texts from baptism, the Supper, and the “keys” of forgiveness. In this last chapter, Lathrop writes about baptism, the eucharist, and the words of absolution, noting that they are “unmixed, overwhelming gift” (133). And then he says, simply: “Listen. Dear pastor, this too is for you.”

It is the word “dear”—used similarly by Lathrop in other places—that is worth noting here. In this book about the spirituality and the life of the pastor, these periodic direct addresses are not saccharine or sentimental; they are not cloying or conde-

scending. Instead, they articulate in a single word—*dear*—what Lathrop communicates again and again throughout this volume: that pastors are cherished, precious, and valuable. Not perfect, no; but living lives of worth and significance.

With his transparent writing, his knowledge of the tradition, his practical wisdom, and his own personal experience, Lathrop

will no doubt help many pastors recall and more fully claim their vocational identity, while giving them—giving us—tools for a “lively, graceful, engaged, and humble way...to be and to walk in the world” (vii).

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