to the choir and probably unnecessary. I am not sure if non-historians will be persuaded by her thesis, and sections can come across as preachy.

More problematic for her overall argument is that for all of Irving-Stonebraker's insistence that we become priests of history, she does not engage with Christian history as a whole. Her main conversation partners are the Anglican tradition and English intellectuals. This is understandable since she is indeed Anglican (and trained in England), but this also limits her impact and relatability. To argue that Christians be priests of history but not engage extensively with Catholicism, Orthodoxy, or other popular and historic forms of Protestantism, such Lutheranism, Methodism, or the Baptists, is difficult to understand. The book also would have benefitted from more engagement with the fields of church history and contemporary theology. Many of her claims have been explored in those spaces, and scholars who specialize in the history of Christianity have long asserted that understanding our history, and historical theology, is vital to the Christian faith.

In the final analysis Irving-Stonebraker has written an intriguing book that defies easy classification. She offers a vigorous defense of the field of history and makes the case that everyone, not just professional historians, should take on the task of tending for the past. Those are noble goals even if the execution is a little uneven.

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THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH, by Hans Schwarz. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2024. 204 pages. $27.00 (paperback).

By now it is a commonplace to observe that the future of the church in the Western world is not particularly bright. The demographic trends are unmistakable throughout Europe and the Anglosphere: churches are in decline, each year losing more members to death and desertion than they are gaining by birth and baptism. This is especially clear in mainline Protestantism in the United States, as well as in the various state churches (or former state churches) of Western European countries like the United Kingdom, the Nordic countries, and Germany. Even while the mainline and state church traditions have modernized their practice by taking progressive positions on controversial social issues—and moderated

their doctrinal convictions to reach an increasingly secular public—the decline continues. There seems to be very little that such institutions can do to reverse course, and it appears that they have largely resigned themselves to managing rather than halting decline.

It is within this environment of decline that Hans Schwarz attempts to meditate on the future. In *The Future of the Church*, Schwarz compiles a series of reflections from his perspective as a German Lutheran pastor and professor who has preached and taught for decades, both in the Germany and the US. The vantage from which this book looks out on the future of the church is decisively shaped by its author's location in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD).

The book consists of four "Parts," instead of chapters. The first of these presents the state of the church in jeopardy today. Looming large for Schwarz are controversies of the ELCA over human sexuality and the authority of scripture. While he appears coy about his viewpoints, Schwarz does question whether revising norms of gender and sexuality is actually relevant. The greater problem as he sees it is one of secularization: the church seems no longer to have anything relevant to say about

life and death to thoroughly secular people. Even the ELCA's mostly rural constituency faces declining church attendance and a crisis of life's meaning, and it seems that the more inclusive a denomination becomes, the more members it loses. Even so, Schwarz points out that these challenges are not unique to the ELCA. Both mainline and evangelical churches face the same basic problem when it comes to secularity, and both face trends of numeric loss.

Schwarz proposes that facing the secular challenge requires the church to return to its essential, singular elements. Schwarz takes up the universal nature of the church, the priesthood of all believers, the office of the ministry, and the means of grace. Interestingly, his presentation draws upon both Lutheran and Reformed confessional traditions to make the case. For example, when defending the third use of the law, he approvingly quotes John Calvin. When Schwarz cautions against presenting law and gospel in an antagonistic relation, he approvingly quotes Karl Barth. Schwarz seems to think that natural law arguments hold limited utility in our secular age. He also presents the law-gospel distinction with an awareness of the pitfalls of modern anti-Jewish interpretations of this doctrine.

Part Three of the book takes up the three dimensions of time and the church's place in them. With respect to the past, the church is the custodian of tradition and the protector of orthodoxy against heresy. With respect to the present, Schwarz spends a significant amount of time discussing the role of the church in social action and political engagement. Schwarz prefers "orders of preservation" to traditional orders of creation. The latter are given to hierarchy and authoritarian control, while the former are more flexible and eschatologically focused. Finally, Schwarz concludes this culminating part of the book with some reflections on eschatology and hope in a secular world. The church is to be a reminder of the heavenly destination for which the believers wait in anticipation. If the church is to bear witness to the future, it must do so using the language and imagery of the bible rather than de-christianized ideologies like Marxism.

Schwarz concludes the book with an epilogue. Here he contends that the church's calling is to be faithful, rather than successful or relevant. The church's message remains the same whether the surrounding culture is secular or not. In this, he is right: the church's vocation is faith in the gospel it proclaims, not the establishment of an institution with the markings of worldly success. I would also add, however, that the church is not the only agent involved here: we should not forget that Jesus Christ

and his Spirit empower the church and its witness. Recognizing that Christ is Lord of his church, sanctifying it by the Holy Spirit, helps avoid thinking of the church in merely sociological terms. Scientific examination of human society will surely only make us despair of our own efforts and our own future if Christ the Lord of history is bracketed out from our considerations. My own hunch is that the church of the future will indeed be smaller—and it certainly will not be successful by any worldly standards. But I do think we can join Schwarz in hoping that the church of the future will be more faithful to the gospel we have received and which we continue to proclaim.

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