

Shorter Reviews

Timothy R Phillips and Dennis L Okholm (eds) *The nature of confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in conversation*, (Downer Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1996) 298 pp.

As a 1980s movement postliberalism is a new boy on the theological block. Despite its name it differs from old-time liberalism as chalk from cheese. Where liberalism sought to reduce the gospel to the axioms and assumptions of Enlightenment (= modern) thought, postliberalism wants to do the reverse. It recognises that there is no foundation beyond Christ and the Scriptures, and that these particularities therefore constitute the very essence of the Christian faith. In the postliberal view our task is not to fit the Bible into the world, but rather to fit the world into the Bible.

Noises of this kind inevitably cause evangelical antennae to vibrate. Is it the case that evangelicals and postliberals could work together, or at least learn from each other? This book explores that possibility. It represents a symposium of papers and discussions from the Wheaton Theology Conference in 1995. Key questions are whether evangelicals can be non-foundationalists (like postliberals), or whether postliberals with their stress on intratextual coherence are really antirealists (as evangelicals suspect). The conversation between the two sides is lively, stimulating and suggestive.

A welcome presence in the book is an essay on the doctrine of the atonement by George Lindbeck, one of the founding fathers of postliberalism. It contrasts with most of the writings of postliberalism which to date have been mainly concerned with method. But a preoccupation with method alone is, as one commentator observes, rather like clearing your throat before a public lecture. You can only do it for a little while before your audience loses interest.

Brian K Smith

Nancy T. Ammerman *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997) 434 pp.

Every month a new stock of books lands on the shelves of Christian book stores purporting to provide the answers to the latest "crisis" in the Church. Nancy Ammerman has done her share of examining crises, publishing a few years ago a penetrating analysis of

the Southern Baptist Convention. In contrast to that subject (and most of the popular "crisis" books) the focus of *Congregation & Community* is largely positive. This extensive report is the product of a team of researchers working under Ammerman's direction. The objective was to study the ways in which congregations have responded to change in their communities. The result is a portrayal of the American Church in the 1990s unequalled in its detail. Both the method and the conclusions have much to offer us in New Zealand.

The communities considered by Ammerman and her team have all undergone considerable change. This change might be economic, ethnic or social in various forms. The concentration is on urban or semi-urban areas. Many of the transitions identified have direct parallels in New Zealand. However, the core of the analysis is in the responses of the congregations. Four broad approaches were found. Those congregations which persisted with essentially the same formulas and styles achieved little more than a managed decline, with no signs of survival past the present generation. Inaction meant eventual death.

The picture is not so straightforward for Churches in the three other categories. One group "relocated" either physically (by moving to new buildings or to another suburb) or virtually (by becoming "niche" congregations, attracting adherents on the basis of factors other than location.) Others adapted "by instituting new policies, activities, and programmes" in line with the altered environment. A fourth group consisted of new or "reborn" congregations, radically different from what had existed before.

Among these three groups was the full range of theological stances and denominational polities. Significantly, neither these nor the type of response (relocation, adaptation, new birth) was found to determine the ability of the congregation to thrive amidst change. Far more important were leadership and the culture of authority and innovation within the congregation.

This study is unmatched for its insights into the challenges facing urban communities in the west. Importantly, Ammerman sets congregational change in the broadest sociological context. Churches must not imagine that they exist in a vacuum. This book calls us to rigorous examination of what is going on in our own cities. It is essential reading for any who claim to be serious about shaping congregations for mission.

Martin Sutherland.