

Good News in Exile: Three Pastors Offer a Hopeful Vision for the Church, Martin B. Copenhaver, Anthony B. Robinson and William H. Willimon (Eerdmans 1999), 116 pp, £7.99 pbk

It is no easy thing to minister in the Church as society faces the turn towards a new millennium. Sweeping changes have taken place in society and mainline churches no longer enjoy the position and status they once did. Indeed, it may be argued that 'Liberals' are now feeling themselves marginalized, without privilege or advantage and so in something of an 'exile'. Further it may be the case that many working in pastoral ministry feel removed from the activity of theology as a theoretical discipline applicable to the life of the churches. These are all presuppositions shared by three North American pastors. In this conversational book they attempt to identify what has changed in various aspects of the life of the Church and trace the implications of those changes. The result is an attractive and stimulating series of essays which take seriously the realities of the contemporary context and the opportunities afforded to the Church by it.

They argue that the Liberal/Conservative polarity is both tired and unhelpful and, drawing on the theoretical work of Lindbeck and Hauerwas, trace strategies for a way to *do* Church in today's cultural context. Three assumptions run through the essays. The first is the reality that the churches are living through a time of loss and relinquishment because of their dramatic decline. They ask whether the Church's future is one of continued decline. Second, they argue that the Church's perspective has been essentially the theology of accommodation and adjustment of the Christian faith to the cultural status quo, with a corresponding loss of the distinctiveness and peculiarity of the claims of Christ. If Jesus is simply one way among many, they ask, why should anyone bother to search for the truth there? Third, they reflect on the Church as a group that has jettisoned the authority of Scripture, of church tradition, and of church discipline in favour of a radically subjectivized notion that truth is self-devised and self-validated. Much of the central arguments within the book respond to these assumptions. The authors trace, through three autobiographical prefaces, how their years of diverse church experiences have led to their fruitful new perspectives. They demonstrate how their own personal perspectives and agendas have shaped the nature and content of their theologies. There follow five short essays exploring Scripture; preaching; ritual and sacrament; Christian formation and teaching; and mission and social action. There is within these essays an attractive honesty and openness together with an underlying sense of confidence grounded in the that the time of exile can be particularly rich and fertile.

This is pastoral theology forged out of a creative dialogue between theory and practice. Its bias is unashamedly towards the Church, as they demonstrate that the natural habitat of theology is not the academy but the Church. Whilst retaining much of its North American flavour there is much here of relevance to British pastoral theology. The book would make an excellent basis for a study or discussion group to explore the nature of the Church in today's society. It is also a good example of how to do pastoral theology from a congregational perspective. The book is graced with a superbly designed cover but lacks

any bibliography or pointers how the book might be used for further study and reflection. More British pastoral theology needs to be written by those struggling with the realities and questions raised here.

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