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Does God Need the Church? by Gerhard Lohfink

William T. Cavanaugh

REVIEWS

Gerhard Lohfink

Does God Need the Church?: Toward a Theology of the People of God, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), ix + 341pp.

Reviewed by William T. Cavanaugh, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN

I don't want to spoil the suspense for anyone, but the answer is "yes." God does need the church insofar as it is an essential part of God's plan of salvation. That much is predictable. The way Lohfink tells the story of salvation, however, goes far beyond the standard ecclesiologies' attempts to choose from various "models" of the church or to make the church "relevant" to today's society. Lohfink begins with creation and works his way through the Old and New Testaments, telling a compelling and inviting story of Israel/church as a central actor in a drama of cosmic proportions. In so doing, ecclesiology is treated not as a particular subspecialty of systematic theology, but as inseparable from biblically-based soteriology, anthropology, eschatology, theology of creation, in short, a complete telling of God's ways with humanity. This is how ecclesiology ought to be done. That it is done by a Scripture scholar trained in historical criticism is evidence that the Holy Spirit has not abandoned the church.

"Creation is from the beginning so designed by God that it will unfold itself as history" (p. 10). In creating freedom, God risks a history tainted by sin. Revolutionaries have always wished to fix that history by sudden violent overthrow; revolutionaries must resort to violence because they are short of time. Because God will not coerce human freedom, however, God's salvation of a wounded history unfolds slowly over time. God does not coerce, but invites humanity to come and see what salvation looks like. Salvation is an aesthetic attraction to the abundant life that is itself the healing of creation. For this attraction to take place, there must be a community of salvation visible in one particular place at one particular time. Thus Israel, which serves as a beacon to which all the nations of the earth will be gathered.

Lohfink shows in ample detail how this story of God's dealings with humanity makes sense of the biblical data. There is first of all a great emphasis on gathering the scattered people. "Individual salvation"

is almost an oxymoron, since the gathering and reconciliation of an atomized humanity is what salvation *is*. Furthermore, the community must be visible, so faith can never be reduced to interior motivation, but is embodied in Torah, that is, what the Israelites do with their land, their genitals, and their pots and pans. This means too that salvation is a matter of changing one's life, of joining a community that lives visibly differently from that part of the world that does not give exclusive allegiance to the true God. And this also means that one must be *trained* in this way of life.

When Lohfink arrives at the New Testament, these themes do not shift. In fact, Lohfink emphasizes that what is new about the New Testament is only that the promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled. Israel is gathered in concrete, visible form in Jesus. So Jesus' first act in Mark on announcing that the Kingdom is "at hand" is to gather 12 disciples to signify the 12 tribes. Lohfink acknowledges the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of the Kingdom in the New Testament, but he refuses to blunt the radical edge of New Testament ecclesiology by saying that the Kingdom remains incompletely present, an anticipation of what is to come in some other space and time. To say so would be to say that God is revealed in Jesus Christ only partially, as an anticipation. It is rather the case that God gives the feast fully now, but many of the invited human guests continue to excuse themselves from participating (Lk. 14:15-24). Indeed, the only evidence that Jesus is the risen Lord is the existence of a community that feasts *now*, an assembled people visibly embodying God's reconciliation. Thus the community of Acts did not defer peace to the "edge of history," as Reinhold Niebuhr would have it, but shared their possessions and lived in peace in the present, right in the middle of a history which was made for and by the Savior.

Lohfink by no means romanticizes Israel or the primitive church, and in fact puts much emphasis on human rebellion against God's plan. Precisely what separates biblical faith from the "religion" of the world is that, unlike religion, which asks "Who am I?", biblical faith asks "What is God's will?", a situation that is bound to produce rebellion. Lohfink does not seek a golden age, but gives a variegated history of Israel's experiments with social form, in which statehood is only a brief detour. He says that state church was a somewhat longer episode in Christian history, but was equally a digression. Lohfink insists nevertheless that the church must have a visible social form if it is to be the church; *ekklesia* was not polis, but neither was it semi-private club or one more interest group in "civil society." At the same time, Lohfink refuses to prescribe a particular model of church as social form.

Indeed, this is one of his stated reasons for writing this book. Although similar in argument to his excellent 1982 book *Wie hat Jesus Gemeinde gewollt?* (published in English as *Jesus and Community*), Lohfink now claims dissatisfaction with his earlier attempt to derive a model for the church of today from the New Testament. He says that his new book is written in a new realization that God does not follow models in building the church. Ecclesiology is proceeding in the confidence of being led by God to what is not necessarily humanly foreseeable.

Lohfink's own experience of being thus led brought him to the *Integrierte Gemeinde*, a community of laypeople and priests in Munich. In 1986 he resigned his professorship at Tübingen and moved into the community with his aging parents. In that community he has been permitted "to experience the beauty of the church anew: the wealth and healing power of its sacraments, the precious value of its traditions, the appropriate and therefore humanly fitting structural plan of its communities, its international character, its origins in the discerning power of Israel, its social structure, its world-embeddedness" (p. 321). The motto of the community is "Come and See." It is Lohfink's conviction that salvation is

accomplished only if it is embodied in the here and now by communities living out salvation. When modern people ask "Where is God? Why doesn't he break his silence? Where is salvation to be found?" we can only point to concrete communities of people gathered by God in all their radical contingency and say "Look."

Some of Lohfink's exegetical conclusions may be disputed, but I find the overall argument wholly convincing. This book has become my one volume I would take to ecclesiology desert island, though to categorize it as "ecclesiology" is to diminish its importance. It is, as the subtitle suggests, nothing less than a "theology of the people of God," and I hope that the breadth of its vision will encourage others to transgress the boundaries of their subspecialties. □

George Hunsinger

Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), ix + 375 pp.

Reviewed by Lois Malcolm, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN

In an age when careless readings of other people's work are in vogue, this book offers refreshingly careful interpretations and analyses. Further, as much more than a collection of essays on Karl Barth, it offers a veritable catechism on major themes in Christian theology.

The first part depicts how Barth (and George Hunsinger) go about the task of political theology. These essays compare Barth to René Girard, liberation theology, and "the politics of sectarian Protestantism." They also think through Barmen's relevance for the "confessing church today." Like Girard and liberation theology—and Martin Luther King—Barth was deeply committed to progressive politics. Unlike them, he grounded his politics in the "saving significance of Christ's death" (p. 5). Such grounding, Hunsinger argues, need not negate but in fact buttresses a commitment to peace and justice, and a concern for "the growing wealth gap, the persisting underclass, the debt trap, and other disturbing indicators of social misery" (p. 5). Indeed, Barth shares much with a pacifist like John Howard Yoder; he even moved in an antimilitarist direction in later life. But his stance was not sectarian; rather he stressed Christ "transforming"—rather than being "against"—culture.

The second part offers a sort of mini-dogmatics. The first two essays are especially insightful. One on Christology explains how Barth avoided conforming to "the one-sided, if mutually corrective, procedures of Alexandria or Antioch." Instead, he "conceptually redescribes" the identity of Jesus Christ in a dialectical fashion that "actualizes" the ecumenical definition of Chalcedon. Another essay responds to the criticism that Barth has a weak doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Especially ingenious is Hunsinger's depiction of the "Holy Spirit's mediation of communion" as—to list its key themes—"trinitarian" (not anthropological), "christocentric"(not pneumatocentric), "miraculous" (not natural), "communal" (not individualist or collectivist), "eschatological" (not epiphanist or triumphalist), "diversified" (not unvarying or undifferentiated) and "universal" (not simply ecclesial). Yet another highly perceptive essay offers an analytical typology that recasts George Lindbeck's "postliberal" theology as a "hermeneutical realism" (as opposed to a "cultural pragmatism"). More will be said about this below. In an essay that addresses concerns of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, Hunsinger contends that with regard to hell and damnation, Barth is not a "universalist" but a "reverent agnostic"; he treats universal salvation as an object of the church's prayer and hope. A final essay shows how Barth relocates the concept of eternity within trinitarian doctrine.