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The Strange New Word of the Gospel: re-evangelizing in the postmodern world

Kevin Powell

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gospel manifestation in the struggle for black liberation from slave revolts through the civil rights movement to black liberation theology. As readers we encounter the effort of white Christians committed to a slave culture training their black “chattel” in a docile obedient Christianity over against the religious fires of revival stirring blacks to appropriate the more fundamental revolutionary character of the gospel to turn the religion of the slavers upon its head. In the last chapter we reconnect with the combination of Afro-American visions of full humanity for all as well as the growing consciousness of an earlier tradition of black pride and the “blackness of God.”

Fortress Introduction to Black Church History emerges as a fine addition to a growing genre, but it is more. It provides, in addition, a source of inspiration of the radical and inclusive character of the Christian gospel over against that racism that some have called appropriately America’s “original sin.”

Oscar Cole-Arnal
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary
Waterloo, Ontario

The Strange New World of the Gospel: Re-Evangelizing in the Post-Modern World

Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jensen, Editors
Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002
176 pages, \$23.00 Softcover

“Postmodernism” is one of the latest buzzwords being bandied about in the church today. Unfortunately, no one really knows what the word means. Often, “postmodern” people have been identified with pluralistic or relativistic theological and spiritual stances (“I find my own truth”), and a consequent distrust of institutional religion (“spiritual” but not “religious”). Many people in our communities are baptized and perhaps attended Sunday School, but no longer believe or live their faith through a Christian community. The purpose of this volume is “re-evangelizing” those who were are part of our congregations but, for many various reasons, have fallen away.

The contributors to this volume fall across the lines of many Christian traditions — Catholic, Orthodox, and mainline Protestant. But the common thread running through each chapter is that “postmodernism” is polluting what was once a pristine faith — confident in its truth claims and concrete in its historical foundations.

This book misses this mark in a few ways. First, many of the contributors confuse the postmodern movement within the church with the modernist tendencies of the Baby Boomer generation. For example, Frank Senn’s critique of the “seeker sensitive” churches is, in many ways, 15 years too late. He is right to be concerned with the lack of theological and liturgical foundations that characterize the seeker sensitive movement, but he neglects the emerging movement of churches that are embracing liturgy, ritual, and iconography. Senn assumes “postmodern” simply means “contemporary” and that the younger generations are simply picking up where Willow Creek left off. Senn’s suggestion that the church have a ready-made seeker service called the catechumenate where the “seeker” is brought into the mystery of the salvation narrative through the ritual re-enactment of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, is a helpful one; and yet I couldn’t get past the “we’ve been doing this for 2000 years and it has always worked” attitude as if, for that reason alone, the traditional liturgical structures should not be tampered with.

But what really bothered me about this book was how much I agreed with many of the contributors. In my experience as a pastor who is evangelistically oriented, I have discovered many young people have become casualties of the Baby Boomer’s hostility toward the historical expressions of faith, which has consequently, led to a sense of rootlessness in their children. “Seekers” as I have encountered them are famished for real bread and fresh wine. They are looking for an encounter with God that is rooted in history and expressed in community — but that transcends them both.

What was needed in this book was not a theological finger waving but an honest dialogue with fellow Christians. While the contributors crossed denominational lines, one group that was conspicuous by its absence was the Evangelical community — the target of much of the theological rhetoric.

What was missing in this volume was an engagement with the new generation of church leaders, self-proclaimed “post-moderns” who are integrating the best of our theological and liturgical

traditions with newer expressions of faith. The Emerging Church movement in the U.S. and the alternative worship movement in the UK are excellent examples of churches engaging the postmodern culture with integrity to what the Western Tradition has passed down, but also effective in reaching the “de-churched.” These “postmodern” churches use the creative arts, technology, and community building to bring the message of the gospel to the “post-Christian” western world. This book completely ignored this creative and energetic movement.

All this being said, this volume offers serious theological reflection on the “whys” and “hows” of re-evangelization within our churches while remaining faithful to our liturgical and theological traditions. While this book doesn’t represent the many sides of the debate, it does provide an excellent overview of one side.

Kevin Powell

Lutheran Church of the Resurrection

Halifax, Nova Scotia

Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making

Peter C. Phan

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003

253 pages, \$34.97 Softcover

The fact that Lutheranism in Canada has experienced a notable increase of Asians within its ranks serves as sufficient logic for more serious examination of Asian contributions to our denomination’s theological project. Beyond that lies a reason which perhaps is greater: Asian Christian thinkers have creativity and insights to offer to our more narrow Eurocentric focus. Moreover, tapping into such resources underscores the full inclusion of the gospel which dare not become imprisoned to one cultural model for its theological discourse.

As Waterloo Lutheran Seminary’s church historian I feel compelled and called to mine this theological mother lode in order to