

## BOOK REVIEWS

Dudley, Carl S., and Hilgert, Earle. *New Testament Tensions and the Contemporary Church*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987. viii + 199 pp. Paperback, \$10.95.

What would you get if you crossed the disciplines of church growth, sociology of religion, early Christian history, NT studies, church leadership, and contemporary religion? You would get an insightful study of past and present, based on scholarly historical research combined with perceptive current analyses, and you would call it *New Testament Tensions and the Contemporary Church*.

The authors of this book are well known to *AUSS* readers. Carl S. Dudley has written widely on contemporary church leadership and church growth issues. Earle Hilgert, a former Andrews University professor, is noted for his expertise in the background of the NT, with particular emphasis on Philo studies. Both authors were professors at McCormick Theological Seminary when this volume was written.

The book starts by exploring the potential available to the student by applying the insights of the social sciences to theology and church history. While admitting some pitfalls (the temptations to generalize in the absence of abundant historical data, to interpret the past in the light of current social realities, and to explain religious experience and history *only* as social and psychological phenomena), the authors defend the legitimate and sensitive use of dialogue between these disciplines.

The theme of the book, emphasizing NT *tensions*, presupposes that a certain dialectical tension in the human situation can provide enormous energy to move society, organizations, and people to a higher level.

What are some of the categories of tensions the book examines? The chapter titles reflect the broad range of issues considered: 1) "Community Formation" examines the roles of common language and vision in creating community, along with the tensions between the "intimate community" and the "institutional church"; 2) "The Energy of Counterculture Christianity" deals with the social dynamics of a sect becoming a church; the tensions between counterculture commitments and social acceptance; and the necessity for balance among charismatic, traditional, and rational leadership methodologies; 3) "Faith Crisis and Christian Witness" discusses cognitive dissonance and the crises of faith, with the resulting powerful energy to be channelled toward accomplishing mission; 4) "Using Conflict Constructively" examines the effects of both internal and external conflict; and 5) "Rituals of Structure and Mystery" treats seeing rituals as sources of stability, structure, and mystery within the church.

I discovered in this book helpful insights into understanding NT and contemporary churches, both as instruments of the Holy Spirit's work and as social organizations. For example, a common, even esoteric, language plays a significant role in community formation (a group's in-house jargon does contribute to its sense of identity, as any scholarly discipline or social group recognizes). Certainly, the sharing of a common vision is a powerful tool for creating a dynamic community. On the other hand, a dependence upon the human effectiveness of common language and vision must be balanced by a sense of the transcendent awareness of the presence of the resurrected Christ and the Holy Spirit, who create and sustain the church. The concept of "tensions" reminds us to give strong emphasis to both of these realities (human social bonding and spiritual dynamics) without diminishing the force of either.

Likewise, the church's mandate to reflect heaven's values in its affirmation of and support for the poor and disenfranchised, along with other expressions of "counterculture" in lifestyle and behavior, are held in tension in the NT with the necessity to support social structures (pray for rulers, even evil ones, and do not flaunt accepted relationships in the family and society, even to the extent of making the best of the diabolical system of slavery). This dialectic must ever be addressed with sensitivity and sometimes anguish by the church as it enters new cultures and confronts the turbulent changes within society today.

One of the topics addressed in this book which speaks directly to our day and its concerns is that of "cognitive dissonance and the crises of faith." The NT believers were forced to reinterpret their understanding of Jesus and His kingdom when He allowed Himself to be crucified, and then ascended to heaven. These events required them to reinterpret their earlier belief in an earthly kingdom and, under the Holy Spirit's power, resulted in an "outburst of energy and commitment, of evangelistic zeal, that carried the gospel 'to every nation'" (p. 77).

In modern times, God has likewise used experiences of disappointment and misunderstanding regarding the return of His Son to energize His people. Might even the current preoccupation of some theologians with "the delay of the Advent" be used by God to generate new energy and commitment to accomplish God's will in our generation?

Every book must be read with perceptive selectivity. I could not find adequate support for all of the implications of the authors' hermeneutical presuppositions. Also, the authors' treatment of Sunday-keeping as an early Christian ritual is better informed than in many books, although their conclusions are unconvincing to me.

This book is paced with fresh insights and stimulating concepts. I am convinced that we can better understand church history and more adequately address the church's contemporary challenges by applying many of the principles it so carefully and skillfully presents.