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## Editor's Notes

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With the millennium fast approaching it is not surprising that there are a number of books being published that examine the state of the church. I want to draw your attention to three of them,

In his *The Church of the Third Millennium* (Paternoster 1999) Phil Hill, pastor of Hockcliffe Street Baptist Church in Leighton Buzzard, has provided a brief and very helpful overview of the state of the church in Britain. The book is divided into three sections. The first section puts the church in its postmodern context. Much has been written on post-modernism, but this is a good and accessible primer on the subject. While mention of “po-mo” has become something of a joke it is nevertheless the context in which we minister and therefore needs to be taken seriously. The second section consists of four brief chapters in which Hill analyses the impact of post-modernity on the church. The chapter titles neatly sum up his points: Unity Without Truth, Conversion without God, Fellowship without Relationships and Spirituality without Selflessness. To some extent these chapters are a simplified version of David Wells’ works. The third section is the more practical. Hill calls for a church that is committed to the Scriptures (not least, in applied expository preaching), spiritually alive, in touch with the world and notably a community of faith. The last point is especially important. Perhaps controversially, Hill emphasises the place of believers’ baptism in shaping the Christian community, but even paedo-baptists would agree with the vital importance of the church regaining a sense of community for her witness to the world. The book’s weakness is a tendency, no doubt born of its brevity, of overly simplifying things. So, for example, at a number of points there are some rather hackneyed contrasts between conservative and charismatic evangelical churches. But that aside, I warmly recommend this book, not least as a basis for discussion in fraternal or congregational leadership teams.

Of a similar ilk is Richard Keyes’ *Chameleon or Tribe?: Recovering Authentic Christian Community* (IVP 1999). Keyes works with the L’Abri Fellowship in the USA and many of the concerns of the late Francis Schaeffer come through in this book. Like Hill, Keyes emphasises the church as community. He particularly highlights the danger in our secular culture of churches either becoming like chameleons and losing their distinctiveness or like tribes existing as subcultures with little interaction with the wider culture. How this happens is helpfully described. Keyes’ antidote is a recovery of a biblical gospel of grace in which the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is robustly proclaimed and reflected in the life of his people. In particular, Keyes calls for a recovery of apologetics. Christian truth must be unashamedly communicated at the same time as many of the blocks to faith are removed. Echoing Schaeffer, Keyes calls for the church itself to become the “final apologetic” as she exhibits the truth of the gospel in the world. It seems to me that this is one of the big issues facing the church in the new millennium.

But the most stimulating of the three books is *Good News In Exile* (Wm B Eerdmans 1999) by Martin Copenhaver, Anthony Robinson and William Willimon. The authors are pastors in “mainline” denominations in the United States, two in

Congregational churches (United Church of Christ) and the third in United Methodist Church. Willimon, the Dean of Chapel at Duke University, is well known as a preacher and co-author with the ethicist Stanley Hauerwas. The influence of Hauerwas is particularly evident and acknowledged, not least his neo-anabaptist emphasis on the church as a community of faith in an alien culture. Brought up and taught at seminary in classic theological liberalism, they have come to discover its spiritual and theological bankruptcy. The book begins with their own very moving accounts of how they have rediscovered the riches of Christian orthodoxy and their calling as ministers to nurture the spiritual life of God's people by preaching and teaching his word. What is particularly moving is to read of how their churches have grown to love the Bible and to expect biblical preaching. One of the authors was told by a church member that the difference between their church now and ten years ago is that today the Bible is everywhere. Aligned with this is a renewed concern for spiritual formation, worship and evangelism. A central theme in the book is that of the exile of God's people in Babylon. As "mainline" ministers the authors had expected to minister in churches that were culturally dominant, only to find that by the 1990s the church in general in the USA and the "mainline" denominations in particular had been marginalised, a situation not dissimilar to exile. But in a very powerful section they ask what happened to Israel in exile? The answer is that she rediscovered the Bible.

There is much in this book that is very thought provoking. I doubt if any of these authors would call themselves evangelicals and it is surprising how little impact evangelicalism seems to have had on their pilgrimage from liberalism. What struck me in reading this book is that just as these men are rediscovering the Bible and the importance of preaching so many evangelicals seem to be neglecting these things. It is so easy to take our evangelical heritage for granted. Perhaps like these refugees from the wreckage of liberalism, we need to realise that we too live as exiles in a strange land and that in the Scriptures we have a treasure that needs to be studied, taught and proclaimed to the nations.

As a millennium project I recommend reading a good historical theology. Surely one of the greatest wonders of the past 2000 years has been what the Scottish theologian James Orr called "the progress of dogma". There are a number of good works in the field, but one of the most recent is Roger Olson's *The Story of Christian Theology* (IVP 1999). Olson, who teaches at Bethel College in Minnesota, tells the story well. This is not dry-as-dust history, but the stories of men (and a few women) that have reflected on the Christian faith. I would love to give the book a ringing endorsement since it is so well written, but I cannot. Much of it is very good. The chapters on the early church and the medieval period are excellent. Olson also highlights theologians and movements often neglected in other historical theologies. For example, he gives considerable space to the Anabaptists and German Pietism. In some measure this reflects what I suspect is his Scandinavian Free Church background. But there are some weaknesses. While Olson does a good job on Luther, he falls down badly on Calvin. Calvin is linked together in a chapter with Zwingli whom he considers the real fountainhead of reformed theology. Calvin was at best a great synthesiser of the

theological insights of others and a great organiser of churches, which is why his reputation is so great. This indicates a certain dislike of the Augustinian-Calvinist strand in historical theology. Olson seeks to rehabilitate Jacobus Arminius as one of the church's most neglected theologians, but does not adequately deal with the Puritans. In focusing on their theological method and ecclesiology, he totally misses their emphasis on the Christian life and a theologian of the stature of John Owen is not mentioned at all. The surprise is the chapter on Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley which, while I could quibble at a number of points, is really very good. The last section of the book deals with liberalism, neo-orthodoxy, evangelicalism and more recent trends. While respecting Hodge, Warfield and Machen as theologians, Olson sees their influence on the evangelical doctrine of Scripture in a somewhat negative light. Olsen wrongly tries to distance it from the Reformers' doctrine of Scripture (p. 566). Barth, on the other hand, is treated far too generously and his conservative critics, such as van Til, dismissed out of hand. Can it really be said that neo-orthodoxy has flourished? Rather than being the bridge between liberalism and evangelicalism that Olson suggests, it seems to me to be a hybrid that leaves little spiritual fruit. One surprising omission is any reference to the impact of Pentecostalism or the charismatic movement on theology. But having said all that, Olsen's book is a good read that will remind you that the "queen of sciences" needs to be returned to her throne.

The BEC Executive Committee has asked me to draw your attention to a project with which I am involved and that hopefully will be of benefit to churches in the United Kingdom. The Board of Trustees of the London Theological Seminary has agreed to establish **The John Owen Centre for Theological Study**. The purpose of the centre is to encourage evangelical theological thinking and inquiry in order that leaders will be equipped for the challenges and opportunities of the next millennium. It is intended for the centre to provide facilities for short-term or sabbatical study, for post-graduate theological study at secular institutions, for doing post-graduate degrees from other evangelical institutions and for particular scholars to pursue lines of study of relevance to the life and mission of churches in the UK. The Centre will be a separate institution from LTS, but will share its facilities at the Kensit Memorial College in Finchley. The Revd Philip Eveson, the principal of LTS, will be the Director of Studies. Behind the founding of the Centre is a concern to see the Reformed evangelical heritage understood, restated and applied today and to encourage biblical theology that nurtures local congregations and connects with the contemporary world. That was what John Owen did in his day and that is what needs to be done today in very different circumstances. The Centre will begin to operate in January 2000 and, as resources permit, to develop its staff and programme. More information about the Centre's programme will be available in the near future, but in the meantime if you would like more information please contact Philip Eveson at the John Owen Centre, 104 Hendon Lane, Finchley, London N3 3SQ (Telephone: 020 8346 7587). Whether it is at the John Owen Centre, or at other institutions such as the Evangelical Theological College of Wales or the Highland Theological College, I would encourage preachers to make use of the opportunities that are available for in-ministry study and training.