

# How is the Body Ailing?

BY JEFFREY W. GARY

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**M**any people today believe that the church in America, in almost all its expressions, is suffering; the Body is ailing. Despite a widespread agreement concerning the fact of illness, careful studies given to pathology and course of treatment are still needed. The three books under review here can be read as attempts at both diagnosis and treatment. Each offers a strong call for a more robust ecclesiology within American Christianity, emphasizing especially the Church's holiness and catholicity. None of these authors flinch in the face of the gravity of the American church's diseased state, but neither do they despair. Each speaks out of the conviction that there is hope for improvement, a hope born out of the conviction that the gospel is after all true, and therefore hopelessness is not a viable option.

In *Thieves in the Temple: The Christian Church and the Selling of the American Soul* (New York: Basic Books, 2013, 264 pp., \$16.99), G. Jeffrey MacDonald locates consumerism as one of the most pressing cancers ailing the body of Christ. His thesis is simple: congregations catering to consumerist audiences have a severely reduced capacity to facilitate substantial transformation of character, a task he places at the core of the Church's mission. The Church does not exist to satisfy consumerist desires but to transform the desires of its "customers," a task he repeatedly labels "saving souls." Using numerous concrete examples along the way, MacDonald demonstrates how low-cost catering to superficial consumer demands has left churches impotent to

facilitate genuine transformation and, instead, has them creating niche interest groups rather than anything approaching genuine catholicity. MacDonald is not bashful in his diagnosis or in naming names along the way, placing several specific churches and church leaders under the microscope.

There is nothing especially unique in MacDonald's critique of ecclesial consumerism. What is perhaps novel is his proposal for treatment, which noticeably does not include seeking to eradicate the disease. In his view, consumerism is so deeply established that the Church must work within the structures of consumerism to return the Church to its mission of transforming desires. He appeals primarily to the laity to use their leverage as consumers to demand activities, classes, and sermons that will actually lead to transformation. As his primary example, he highlights the laity in the ancient church who bore much of the burden for the integrity of the Church and who chose their leaders on the basis of who could lead them to become more virtuous.

Aside from perhaps too selective and simple a reading of the ancient laity's role, MacDonald's appeal for congregants to use their consumer leverage to force change is questionable. First, MacDonald's proposal assumes a substantial enough number of people whose desires are well ordered to leverage this kind of change. Yet according to his argument, that is precisely what the disease of consumerism seems to have made impossible, though he suggests there are growing numbers of people expressing such concerns. Second, one might ask what it means for consumers to use leverage, which is the language of coercion, including an implied threat: "If you don't do it my way, I'll leave." If the goal of Christian living is transformation into the image of Christ, as MacDonald repeatedly asserts, shouldn't the means to the goal fit the character of the goal itself? Must we capitulate to the language and practice of consumerism by taking an "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" strategy?

Aside from these questions about method, MacDonald's is a strong call for substantial change. He expresses hope that American Christians could respond positively to a message of costly sacrifice as the path to transformation, since they know high-cost sacrifice in so many other areas such as sports and long work hours. He wisely includes the warning that a high-cost orientation does not necessarily lead to transformation; it sometimes leads to prideful legalism rather than hearts that bear the fruits of the Spirit. Still, he believes it is important for churches to call for more costly sacrifice as an antidote to the corrosive effects of consumerism.

Although many are diagnosing the disease of ecclesial consumerism, and at a far more nuanced level, MacDonald's book still has a role to play. First, it is written for a lay readership and could prove useful in guided reading groups within a congregational context. Second, it is peppered with anecdotes, statistics, and stories illustrating not only diseased churches but churches effectively limping toward healing. Third, it concludes in a hopeful key that the cancer may not be terminal, which is important for those who believe the gospel is true.



In *The Borders of Baptism: Identities, Allegiances, and the Church*, Theopolitical Visions 11 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011, 204 pp., \$22.00), Michael Budde diagnoses another deteriorating disease in the American church: ailing allegiance. This book is a collection of occasional essays and lectures that

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come together coherently around the organizing theme of “ecclesial solidarity.” Ecclesial solidarity names “the conviction that ‘being a Christian’ is one’s primary and formative loyalty, the one that contextualizes and defines the legitimacy of other claimants on allegiance and conscience” (p. 3). Budde’s contention is that the American church has allowed itself to be subordinated, especially by the

state, such that it has come to play a domesticated chaplaincy role at best. Baptism should mark entry into a new kind of people along the lines of an ethnic group (e.g., 1 Peter 2:9) whose primary allegiance is to Christ. American Christianity, however, has allowed baptism to become spiritualized and subsumed under supposedly more fundamental allegiances such as patriotic or ethnic ties. Budde’s central argument is that Christianity will become increasingly irrelevant unless it reclaims its distinctiveness according to which the “borders of baptism” delineate a transnational people who stand in the world as a prototype of reconciled humanity; in other words, it is an argument for catholicity.

Budde broadly sketches his vision of ecclesial solidarity in the opening two chapters. The remaining chapters seek to flesh out this vision through a variety of issues facing contemporary American Christians such as immigration, politics, racial makeup of churches, corporate practices, and several others.

Two chapters illustrate how he specifically applies “ecclesial solidarity.” Chapter five deals with the question of immigration. Budde reports on a bill passed by the Oklahoma legislature in 2008 that made it illegal to knowingly transport illegal immigrants and made it more difficult for them to get jobs or receive governmental services. He then relays the story of a Catholic bishop who wrote a letter to the churches in his diocese rejecting the bill as immoral and informing these churches that their diocese would make available all its charitable resources to suffering illegal immigrants as if to Christ himself. And in the case that illegal

immigrants with children were arrested, the church would take responsibility for the welfare of their children. Budde concludes:

Things like this serve as a vivid reminder that when it's self-aware, the Church is larger than any nation, more diverse than any region, more deeply rooted in the life of the poor than any other entity that would claim us. In a global perspective, it's the Church that is truly the polity that makes one out of the many (*e pluribus unum*, and all that); states, countries, ethnicities, tribes, and classes look like sectarian enclaves in comparison. (p. 89)

There are many Christians in this situation for whom national solidarity would trump ecclesial solidarity. As a result, Budde says one of the most pressing ecclesiological concerns right now is the "converting of the baptized" so that being a disciple trumps being a citizen of the state.

In a related way, chapter ten takes up the topic of treason. Americans have been formed to give unreflective assent to the notion of patriotic loyalty to country, doing almost anything to avoid the charge of treason. Budde points out that the earliest Christians did not think of Rome as being *their* empire, and although relieved when not being persecuted, they certainly were not surprised by charges of treason when they came. Budde asserts that a Church seeking to be faithful to the gospel knows that "'treason' is an irremovable possibility of a robust ecclesiology that 'seeks first the Kingdom'" (p. 164).

Like MacDonald, while Budde's diagnosis is sobering, his prognosis is hopeful. He believes that the contemporary scene of advancing globalization is leading to an increased transnational consciousness and changing notions of sovereignty as it relates to states. These transnational movements may serve to loosen nationalist tendencies that have crippled proper Christian allegiance, and they may provide new opportunities for American Christians to rediscover a more catholic social identity whose borders are as wide as the transnational borders of baptism.



Similar to Budde's book, William T. Cavanaugh's *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011, 208 pp., \$18.00) is a collection of previously published articles that come together beautifully around a tightly organized thesis. Over the breadth of these essays, Cavanaugh argues against the commonly held notion that secularization has led to a decline in religion. He argues, instead, that devotion traditionally located within the Western church has slowly migrated to the nation-state which took over and secularized theological concepts and constructed itself as a kind of savior capable of demanding ultimate allegiance. Over time, the nation-state

effectively subordinated the Church, relegating the Church's proper influence to the realm of "religion" (understood as that which is spiritual and private), whereas the state oversees the "political" realm. Cavanaugh adamantly rejects the separation of religion and politics as separate spheres governed by separate entities, because it has led Christians into a confusion of primary allegiance. Similar to Budde, Cavanaugh argues repeatedly and in various ways that the Church is its own form of visible politics and must not allow itself to be subordinated under a nation-state that (mistakenly) presents itself as being more universal in scope.

One of Cavanaugh's great strengths is that his diagnosis of the Church includes a careful history of the disease's inception and progression. Cavanaugh courageously challenges established and highly revered claims and myths about the modern nation-state. The best example of this counter narration occurs in the opening chapter entitled "'Killing for the Telephone Company': Why the Nation-State Is Not the Keeper of the Common Good." The nation-state is often said to have arisen naturally out of society and to maintain a limited role within it, part of which is to protect and promote the common good. Cavanaugh shows through careful historical analysis that the modern state did not arise naturally out of the pursuit of the common good but rather was constructed through the centralization of power by dominant groups who violently gathered resources for themselves from the general population. The state then created "society" by absorbing rights and responsibilities that once belonged to a variety of special groups and creating artificial boundaries, increasing its sovereignty over a monolithic space and presenting itself as the keeper of the common good that could demand sacrifice of those within its bounds benefitting from that service. But as Cavanaugh argues, the nation-state cannot possibly be the keeper of a truly common good. He urges an alternative vision along the lines of Augustine's "two cities," according to which Church and state are two cities mapped not onto space but onto time.

In Cavanaugh's view, the American church must assert its own political identity by resisting the artificial borders and idolatrous claims to universality (i.e., catholicity) made by states. Several times throughout these essays he returns to the point that the early church chose the term *ekklesia* to describe itself rather than words that indicated particular groups within a larger whole, such as *koinon* or *collegium*. The term *ekklesia* has its roots in God's history with Israel, who served as the primary and visible location of God's saving action within the world. Most of Israel's history did not occur in the form of a state in any recognizable sense. Cavanaugh is eager to suggest that in presenting itself as an alternative and visible political reality, the Church is not withdrawing from the world but serving it as a sign of salvation history, partly by reminding the worldly state of its contingent nature.

Clearly, Cavanaugh's is a strong ecclesiology that emphasizes the visibility of the Church's distinct presence in the world. How does such an ecclesiology take seriously the fact of obvious human sinfulness in the

Church, preventing a triumphalist account? Cavanaugh is very sensitive to this important question, and in what is perhaps the most theologically stunning essay in this collection (the penultimate chapter), he seeks to integrate the visible holiness of the Church with its sinfulness in a way that does not simply leave them pulling in opposite directions. He seeks this integration by locating the Church's existence within Chalcedonian Christology that rejects Monophysitism (which risks overwhelming Christ's divinity with his humanity) and Nestorianism (which risks separating Christ's divinity and humanity). Chalcedon affirms that Christ fully assumed our sinful humanity without diminishing his divinity, the drama of salvation and the overcoming of sin being played out in one person. How does this impact the Church's self-understanding? Cavanaugh argues that since the Church is the body of Christ (though not Christ himself), its mission is through its visibility. What it makes visible is not purity; that is often lacking. Yet the Church must not resign itself to sinfulness, as if holiness belongs to it only by anticipation. Chalcedonian Christology provides a way of addressing sin that does not negate visible holiness. The Church's holiness is visible precisely in repentance for its sin; the Church plays the role of sinful humanity but does so in hope of redemption, making visible the ongoing drama of salvation.



These three books send out a refreshingly strong call for the church in America to face several key facets of its ailing condition. While they are firm, these authors successfully avoid the shrill and snarky tones that often carry this message. Rather, theirs is a call for a robust ecclesiology that is guided by a genuine hope that the church in America can respond to the call to return its full allegiance to the one true and living God.



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