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Stumbling in the light: New Testament images for a changing church

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Stumbling in the Light: New Testament Images for a Changing Church

Robert Kysar

St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999

158 pages, \$24.00 Softcover

Most of us preachers really enjoy a how-to book on preaching. If you are one of them, get Kysar's *Stumbling in the Light*. On just about every page, Robert Kysar, who is Bandy Professor of Preaching and New Testament, emeritus, at Candler School of Theology, pulls back the curtain to give us a new view on the gospel. Through the power of metaphors, Kysar constructs a system for change (the "c" word) in the church that does not involve church growth methods or evangelism programs.

In the first two chapters, Kysar discusses the impact of post-modernism on self-understanding and the importance of metaphors as means of manoeuvring through these times. Kysar argues that we define ourselves through metaphors, but in time metaphors lose their power and die. Once that happens, we flounder though lack of vision and a sense of mission. Corporations understand the impact of metaphors. The reason they spend thousands of dollars on changing company logos is that they might effectively represent the company's vision and mission to the consumer.

Of course, the early church used metaphors in its effort to define its vision and mission: the rock, the anchor, the fortress, the body of church, a flock, the vine, the Kingdom of God and more. Kysar does not deny the value of these metaphors, but insists that they have lost their effectiveness resulting in the church losing its sense of calling.

For the next three chapters he offers a renewed self-understanding for the church under the metaphors: (1) "on the way," (2) "home and homing," and (3) "stumbling in the light." Clustered together, he offers a new image of the church: "*The church is a community of faith on the way home, stumbling in the light.*" The synoptic stories of Jesus and Book of Acts are stories with movement: pilgrims on the journey of life failing and struggling, but nevertheless, surprised by God's grace. Next he pulls from Pauline and deuteropauline literature, 1 Peter, Revelation, and the Gospel of John, the concept of home. To avoid stagnation, however, Kysar describes it in the active voice, "homing," that is, between two homes, the one here and the one hereafter. While we are here "on the way, homing" we are stumbling – not just in the dark – but also in the light. We are always "becoming," always progressing. We stumble but God's grace (light) picks us up again and again and again.

For the preacher this clustered metaphor can offer many points of

connecting with our post-modern culture. To assist, Kysar's final chapter "Sowing the Seeds" provides application and stimulation for preaching, teaching and visioning. Through paradoxes and tensions, Kysar shows us a way to help the person in the pew hear the gospel and, in hearing the gospel, hear the call.

Stumbling in the Light will be a valuable addition to an advanced homiletics course reading list, but its true benefit will be discovered in the pulpit as we image the old, old story in a new, new way. Get it, savour it, use it – it's that kind of book.

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The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom

Alan Kreider

Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999

126 pages, \$16.95 Softcover

As one fascinated by the patristical period of Church history, I was immediately pleased to discover Alan Kreider's compact volume. Kreider lays out an ambitious thematic study of the early church fathers focusing on the subject of *conversion* as an activity of the Christian community. His thesis takes a different spin on the controversial topic of "Christendom": unlike many scholars who place the sole blame upon the "Constantinian Revolution" for the "degradation" of Christianity into "Christendom" (generally understood as *caesaropapism* – the church and state become one), Kreider traces the development of the "Christendom" socio-political reality through changes in how the church has gone about converting people.

Kreider briefly considers writings by such fathers as Justin Martyr, Cyprian of Carthage, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, as well as Augustine, Volusian, and Caesarius of Arles. He focuses on writings in which these fathers discuss their own "conversion" experiences, as well as catechetical and homiletical writings that deal with the problem of converting the masses (or of converting those already nominally Christian to a higher morality). His historical consideration of the "conversion of Constantine" and the subsequent favouring of the church in early Byzantine society is fair-minded, but contains no particular surprises in its analyses (Kreider holds to the current critical hypothesis of the "Constantinian Revolution," for the most part, at least as being the beginning of the problem, if not its ultimate cause). Kreider's concern is that the new status of Christianity