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Table of Contents

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Richard N. Longnecker, ed. *Community Formation in the Early Church and in the Church Today.* Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002. Pp. 251. $19.95 (Paper).

**[1]** These twelve essays describe how "the Christian church is structured and its life expressed." Divided into four groups, they describe the social context, biblical understanding, and historical formation of the early church, and conclude with three discussions of community formation among contemporary Protestant denominations.

**[2]** Longnecker's introduction efficiently justifies and summarizes its general goal. He describes the evolution of a nineteenth century Protestant consensus regarding the formation and nature of the Christian Church. This consensus specifies that the organization of the church evolved gradually, and is not biblically or dogmatically specified. This consensus has ever since been dominant in Protestant circles. In this book Longnecker reviews that consensus in the light of current scholarly research.

**[3]** The first three essays describe the social context of the early church. Richard. S. Ascough's "Greco-Roman Philosophic, Religious, and Voluntary Associations" describes the literary and archeological data informing us about the main types of organization available as the church was taking shape. Alan. F. Segal's "The Jewish Experience: Temple, Synagogues, Home and Fraternal Groups" describes the major institutions of Jewish life in the first two centuries C.E. "Building 'an Association (Synodos) . . . and A Place of Their Own,'" by Peter Richardson describes the early church's archaeological remains, attempting to deduce from them how the early church formed and operated.

**[4]** All three essays are heavily influenced by the thesis that the early church was structured as a Greco-Roman voluntary association. Together the authors make a convincing case for this thesis. However, the functions and structures of voluntary associations were so broad that the thesis does not tell us as much as one might hope. For example, it leaves open the issue of how closely the new Christian church was related to Roman institutions vs. Jewish ones. Segal and Richardson both indicate that the synagogue was also structured as a voluntary association. But did the form of the church develop out of, in parallel with, or in dialog with the form of the synagogue?

**[5]** The second section of the book discusses the early church that is presented in the New Testament, providing a biblical grounding for our understanding of church order. C. E. Evans' "The Ministry of Jesus in the Gospels" presents an analysis of Jesus' ministry to be used as a benchmark for the ministry of the Church. While the Gospels contain little explicit direction regarding church order, Evans uses "ministry" as the concept linking the life and teaching of Jesus Christ to the life and operation of the Body of Christ. Richard Longnecker himself, contributes the essay "Paul's Vision of the Church and Community Formation in His Major Missionary Letters." Longnecker also argues that the Pauline congregations should be understood as "contextualizations appropriate for a particular time, culture and circumstance, which should be appreciated on their own merits." They were not "exceptional" or "provisional." Neither were they exact models to be followed rigorously in our own day. Strongly influenced by social scientific models, S. Scott Bartchy contributes "Divine Power, Community Formation, and Leadership in the Acts of the Apostles." I. Howard Marshall rounds off the section with "Congregation and Ministry in the Pastoral

Epistles."

**[6]** The book then moves on to the early church. Alan. H. Hayes' "Christian Ministry in Three Cities of the Western Empire (160-258 C.E.)" reviews what we know of comparatively well-documented communities of Lyons, Carthage, and Rome. Hayes argues that ecclesial structures developed late, and interprets material in a manner different from the traditional interpretation. He argues that Cyprian was not defending Church institutional authority; he was imposing it, against local objections. Hayes argues that the second century Roman community was a set of loosely affiliated congregations. Hayes reinterprets Pope Victor's second century excommunication of the Asian churches in the controversy over the date of Easter as a misremembered Roman squabble between Latin congregations and nearby house-churches whose congregations were ethnically "asian." Frances Young's essay, "Ministerial Forms and Functions in the Church Communities of the Greek Fathers," makes an interesting companion piece to Hayes' paper. Young is less radical in his interpretation of church history, incorporating the Ignatian letters into an analysis of the early church, and arguing that the episcopacy and the diaconate preceded the presbyterate in the development of the Church. It would be interesting to read further dialog between these two authors.

**[7]** The final section of the book is written from the point of view of three Protestant denominations. John Webster's contribution, "The Self-Organizing Power of the Gospel: Episcopacy and Community Formation," provides an Episcopal point of view, advocating episcopacy on pragmatic, rather than dogmatic grounds. David C. Hester then follows with "The Sanctified Life in the Body of Christ: A Presbyterian Form of Christian Community." Miroslav Volf rounds out the section with the most powerful of the three, "Community Formation as an Image of the Triune God: A Congregational Model of Church Order and Life." Volf's essay profoundly links his discussion of the relation of the congregational participative community to the image of the triune God. It goes a long way to repairing the suspicion that the Protestant consensus abandons an understanding of the church as particularly God-given and grace-filled.

**[8]** This book will be useful to the groups that are its intended customers: ministers, theological students, and interested lay people wanting a thought-provoking discussion of the Protestant consensus on church polity. It meets its general editor's goal of staying accessible to educated laymen. Scholars who read it will appreciate the bibliographies, several of which refer to longer treatments of the same subject by the articles' authors. A second group of people would also benefit from reading this book: Catholics and Orthodox Christians who are interested in understanding the world-view of the Protestantism. There is more than enough substance in this book to permit someone from a high church tradition to engage the Protestant ecclesial understandings in a lively, contemporary, and intelligent form.

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JRS Home