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Review of "The Church Event: Call and Challenge of a Church Protestant"

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The Church Event: Call and Challenge of a Church Protestant

By Vitor Westhelle

Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2010. ix + 181pp. \$20.00. ISBN 978-0800663322

In *The Church Event*, Vitor Westhelle, a Lutheran theologian at The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, paints a richly textured portrait of the church incorporating multiple perspectives ranging from biblical texts to Patristics to Luther's theology to contemporary global voices, both secular and theological. Blending biblical exegesis, historical research, sociological analysis and theological investigation, the result is a provocative and challenging invitation to reconsider ecclesiology in a historical moment in which the church's unique and indispensable witness and mission are desperately needed to speak and embody a word of liberating truth to the world.

More a collection of essays than a seamless monograph, Westhelle's offering can be divided into two main arguments. First, he proposes that classical social models of the *oikonomia* (the household, with its overtones of economics) and the *politeia* (the political realm, or, more broadly conceived, society), while often used either positively or negatively to situate the church in the world, fail to demarcate the space actually occupied by the church, namely the liminal space "between the house and the street" (pp. 89ff.). This means for ecclesiology that the church ought to be conceived as occupying the boundary between the spaces in which we live and move in our daily lives, offering rest and haven from the economic and political travails of modern life while also speaking a word of judgment and redemption (law and gospel) in those places.

Second, Westhelle names the church as an eschatological event that happens on the boundaries and the margins of contemporary life, thereby conceiving the church as both an occupier of space (on the *eschata* defined as margins) and an occurrence in time (at the *eschata* as the advent of the end). Church is here construed as an "epiphanic space" where the divine presence is manifest in the trappings, or what Luther called the *larvae* (masks), of the stuff and rhythms of everyday existence (pp. 145ff.). The church is in fact a "hybrid space" that combines aspects of place, which is a space of dwelling and belonging, and locale, which is a space of transition and not belonging (p. 143). In other words, the church is both "in" the world and "beyond" the world, occupying the liminal spaces between belonging and being on the move, between the familiar and the surprising. As such, the church is marked by its quality of "adjacency," literally being thrown toward the boundaries and bridging the separations between these spaces of house and street. The church, therefore, does not exist for itself, for the flourishing of the institution. Rather, the church exists for the sake of the pilgrims who make their way through the liminal space of the church on their journeys between house and street. As Westhelle puts it in the final chapter, "It is in this adjacency that church happens; it is an event" (p. 163).

The essays in *The Church Event* are meditations on these two main themes, each weaving a new pattern into a complex and unfinished tapestry (another of Westhelle's metaphors for the church). Readers will find a wealth of secondary sources to pursue in their thinking about issues such as the status of Scripture in the Protestant tradition, the Trinitarian grounding of the doctrine of the church, the prophetic mission of the church at the dawn of the twenty-first century, and the role of tradition in a church that confesses itself reformed and ever reforming. The strength of Westhelle's latest offering is its diverse and ambitious selection of themes and conversation partners, but this strength is also a weakness of the book, as readers hoping to find a straightforward systematic discussion of the doctrine of the church will be disappointed. To

borrow a musical metaphor, Westhelle has produced a work of free-flowing jazz and invites readers to listen carefully for various motifs and threads weaving their way through the performance. Some will be familiar and some will be challenging, but readers who are willing to devote themselves to a careful engagement with this text will be richly rewarded.

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