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Reformation of Journalism: A Christian Approach to Mass Communication (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

by John M. Zinkand

The Reformation of Journalism: A Christian Approach to Mass Communication by Jon R. Kennedy. Reviewed by Mike Vanden Bosch.

This book is a valuable compilation of what various Christian thinkers have had to say about journalism. Chapter one reviews the philosophy of Abraham Kuyper, Groen van Prinsterer, and Herman Dooyeweerd upon which these Christian thinkers build. Chapter two aims to show why and how the Christian must act in the world of journalism, what his goals must be, and what he should expect to accomplish. Kennedy rightly concludes that journalism "offers the Christian concerned about his responsibility to Christ in the various spheres of life an exceptionally well-rounded opportunity to get involved" (p. 28). By this he means that the Christian can readily find the spirit of apostasy on any page of a contemporary newspaper, and the Christian ought to confront it as such.

On the other hand, when Kennedy quotes Robert Hassert's attempted analysis of journalistic activity in terms of Dooyeweerd's schema for the cosmonomic law-idea, he shows that this academic activity has not yet achieved

relevancy. Hassert concludes, for example, that "Journalism is an activity that takes its central meaning from an interaction of linguistic and societal laws of creation" (p. 25). That may be true or not true, but it will not resolve any problems for the practicing journalist.

In chapter three, Kennedy states that his present objective is "not defining the religion which drives journalists but the religion from which their journalism springs" (p. 36). But he seems more interested in building a case than in discerning shades of difference. He quotes Joseph Pulitzer's creed which described the purpose of a newspaper as fighting for progress and reform, and never tolerating injustice or corruption. Then he quotes the "Journalist's Creed" composed by the University of Missouri journalism faculty, which states, in part, "I believe that the journalism which succeeds best—and best deserves success—fears God and honors man; is stoutly independent, unmoved by pride of opinion or greed of power...is always respectful of its readers, but always unafraid." But in both Kennedy sees only "a clearly discernible strain of profit motivation." What words, what lines show this "strain of profit motivation" he does not make clear. Rather he merely asserts that it is there. And having asserted that it is there, he quotes a

radically Christian journalist who has written that "this strain determines the structure of all mass media existing in North America and Western Europe." Such asserting rather than documenting is an unwarranted shortcut that cannot be passed off as scholarship.

Kennedy then makes some valid observations about the religious press in America. It usually aims its articles to Christians, he points out, not to the secular world, and in doing so, fails to be the salt to the world.

He then tries to link the creed of Christianity Today with those of Pulitzer, and others, whom he has condemned as motivated by profit. He quotes from Christianity Today's statement of purpose which calls for risks taken in the confidence that God is all powerful and Christians are expendable. Christianity Today will look for bold and creative approaches and will take those necessary risks. Above all, we will continue to be open to new light from the Bible and better understanding and appreciation of its teaching on all matters. We intend to proclaim Christ's Gospel with passion and to apply the ethical teachings of the Bible to the contemporary social crisis (p. 48).

But curiously, instead of examining a few issues of Christianity Today to determine whether they live up to their creed, Kennedy instead quotes from The Guide which leveled some ad hominem attacks on J. Howard Pew, financial backer of Christianity Today, and then concludes it is merely another of the profit-motivated North American journals.

Kennedy then points to the creedal statement of Vanguard's co-editor, Robert Carvill which states in part,

Briefly stated, the vision that directs the Vanguard is this: Vanguard, Christian Vision for the Seventies, seeks to proclaim Christ as the Redeemer and Renewer of all things. By faith in Christ, man may dedicate the fulness of life to God in loving and obedient service. We confess that all human activities, relationships and institutions must be directed by the authoritative Word of God.

That's a fine creed, one Christian journalists might do well to live by. But its implications are not all that different from the implications of the creed expressed in Christianity Today. Kennedy would have served us better by comparing articles in the respective magazines to see which magazine had lived up to its creed rather than dismissing one by attacking its "angel,"

and admiring the other for no discernible reason.

In chapter four Kennedy quotes extensively from Richard Forbes who makes some good points, and some debatable ones. Forbes states that the various faith communities are not given significant space in the periodical press of the United States and Canada. He then condemns the Evangelical Press Association for operating out of the same spirit as the secular press, and not insisting on a "restructuring of the press."

Forbes' idea of "restructuring the press" is to "pluralize communications," that is to make public funds available to each "faith community" to publish its ideas or alternatives, and advocate them openly before the whole population. This idea is not without its appeal, and deserves attention. But it will inevitably bring up the question of which faith communities deserve public funds. All? Satanists? If not all, then the government or an appointed agency will have to discern between legitimate and illegitimate "faith communities," a task not easily done.

Kennedy also quotes R. J. Rushdoony who holds that in terms of Dooyeweerd's philosophy, the press is "an independent law sphere directly under God" (p. 78). It would seem, upon reflecting on the Watergate investigation carried on by the Washington Post reporters, that that newspaper, at least, would agree. But I'm not sure many Christians are ready to grant the press that much authority. It fits in with the conception of the press as the "Fourth Estate," but in Christian circles, people are more likely to look to the church or its ministers for an evaluation of journalism. That journalism should be responsible neither to the church nor to the state, but to God, may be right, but if it is, Christians may be the hardest to convince, for it raises many problems. First, living under predominately secular press, people can be excused if they ask, to whom is the press responsible? For a secular press would not acknowledge a responsibility to God. And secondly, in the spheres of the church and the school, Christians have set up seminaries and colleges for training leaders. But where are the schools for training Christian journalists? There are some, of course, but the Reformed community has been lax here. It had better take note.

In chapter five, Kennedy quotes extensively from Robert Carvill's treatise suggesting several reforms in journalism. Carvill's main point seems to be that we must switch from "objective" journalism to "advocacy" journalism. Carvill states,

This whole idea of impartiality and

objectivity is pure hockum. All articles are editorial products and should be signed.

Further, the widespread practice of having special editorials for the expression of "pure?" opinion as opposed to "objective" hard, factual is the result of a split of the event covered into something that happened without a human being there and something that is purely human, two wholly erroneous and even sinful ways of thinking about the creation.

...consider this. There are always three prime elements or "sides" to any event-article situation. There is the object considered by the subject which are both responsible to the Law which holds for that situation.

What one misses from humanistic reporting and interpreting (as if they were different!) is any reference to the Law, the very conditions which make human freedom (absolutized into autonomous human creative power) possible.

The duty of the Biblically directed journalist is to keep always that Law—with its structure and direction—in mind, whether implicit, explicit, or in open advocacy (p. 89-90).

Carvill is right, of course, that writers are rarely objective. But one would hope that they are often not only willing but eager to reserve judgment. After all, even a Christian journalist isn't omniscient. Hence a somewhat "objective" reporting, presenting the facts fairly and accurately, would often be preferable to "advocacy" journalism.

Kennedy ends his book by looking at the attempts of four journals to be radically Christian. Then he quotes Kuyper, Forbes, Olthuis, and Gerald Vandezande, who flesh out the theories advanced in the course of the book. Vandezande quotes 15 Canadian Senators who reported that journals are not selling content, but that content was merely a means of attracting an audience of advertisers. There is some truth to this. All of us have wished that newspapers would take responsibility for the products they advertise, for whether the products would enrich or destroy a life. So when Vandezande pleads,

Businessmen, let's end the rip-off!
Please quit pushing a consumption-oriented life-style that makes economic animals out of our neighbors and that entrenches the dollar-driven media—media which seldom, if ever,

have a truly Christian word for a world going mad for lack of real vision food (p. 128),

we can only applaud. The purpose of advertising should be to bring buyer and seller together and not to create needs that God never intended.

This compilation deserves to be taken seriously by all who seek to develop responsible Christian journalism.

Washington: Christians in the Corridors of Power, by James C. Hefley and Edward E. Plowman, Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Ill., 1975, 200 pages, \$3.95 (paper). Reviewed by William Nawyn, Associate Professor of History and Political Science.

This book is at once comforting and disturbing. It is indeed reassuring to know that there are many "Christians in the corridors of power" in our nation's capital; it is disquieting that, in spite of this, there is so little fruit in evidence in terms either of a powerful Christian voice in national government or of specifically Christian views expressed in the debates and discussions leading to the policies and programs adopted. This book will serve to revive the spirits of those who have succumbed to a defeatist attitude and who have concluded, like Elijah, that Baal has utterly triumphed; it is good to know that there are yet many "prophets of the Lord" in or near the center of government.

In this brief volume, James C. Hefley, a free-lance writer, and Edward E. Plowman, the news editor of Christianity Today, have called attention to Christians in many offices and levels of the national government. Their information is the accumulation of personal interviews of many Christians in the Washington area. The book, consequently, is largely the compilation of names with bits and pieces of biographical information about the individuals thus highlighted, along with their activities as Christians. Much of this activity seems to be limited to participation in prayer groups. As a matter of fact, the book could almost be referred to as the story of Washington prayer groups. The surfeit of names and the almost gossipy chronicling of who-belongs-to-what prayer-group detracts from the general interest level of the book. The end result, nevertheless is an introduction to an extensive sampling of Christians in or associated with the national government ranging from one of the barbers in the House of Representatives' barber shop to