

Delight and Defence of The UK Blessing

If you're anywhere within 200ft of a Christian's social media you will have encountered this youtube video. Musicians and worship leaders from a number of churches across the UK, singing "The Blessing" over the nation.



The video is here in case you've missed it: The UK Blessing on youtube.

Let me be clear from the outset here: I *delight* in this song and how it's being used. This post isn't a substantial critique. It's a bit of wondering, a bit of defence, a bit of leaning off from it to think about the times we're in and the church of which we are a part. The song itself (attributed in the main to Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes) came into the limelight coincidentally with the Covid-19 pandemic. We've sung it ourselves as a household in this strange season.

So here goes: I **delight** in this song.

I delight in the content of the song. Its main motif draws upon the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:22-27:

The Lord said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron and his sons, "This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

""The Lord bless you

and keep you;

the Lord make his face shine on you

and be gracious to you;

the Lord turn his face towards you

and give you peace.'"

These are deep and rich words that Scripture leans on from time to time to give assurance of God's love and favour. It's there again in Psalm 67, for instance. It's not about individualistic blessing: the focus is on *nation* and *generations*. This also has rich grounding (Exodus 20:6, Deuteronomy 7:9) as does the invocation of God's *presence* (e.g. Joshua 1:9) and God being *for* his people. These deep waters well up in the New Testament (e.g. Romans 8:31) as declarations of how fundamentally, totally, existentially, substantially, utterly, profoundly is the blessing of God to be found in Jesus of Nazareth, died and risen again as Lord and Saviour!

Notice how a lot of this biblical grounding is from the formative days of God's people, Israel, in the time of their rescue from slavery in Egypt, their wandering in the wilderness, and the entering into the promised land. These were not easy roads. There were afflictions from around them, and the afflictions of sin and wayward hearts within them. Sometimes it may seem like the loving heart of God looks like discipline (some of us are feeling that at the moment) and feels like his absence (ditto): but the deeper truth remains and calls the heart to trust him. He is for you. He is with you, to the thousandth generation. May his face look upon you and give you peace. **At this time of affliction**, however we might feel it and experience it, these are life-giving words to sing.

Of course, some may (and have) suggested that the blessing that the Scriptures reserves to God's people shouldn't be invoked over the world at large. The critique is not invalid: the blessing of God is not merely a universally and thinly applied sense of warmth, it is deep and located and especially attached to God's determined work, his promises to his people, and his presence in the person and work of Jesus. But it's not

wrong to pray for the blessing of many. I've addressed this question before. I long for all people to know the loving presence and saving grace of God, who knows us and made us and has given us his Son to save us and lead us into an eternal life that begins now. Especially now.

I delight in the recording and release of this song. Having had to come to grips with sermon recording and livestreaming, I can very much delight in the video and audio editing skills!

It's not perfect, of course. I've already seen some comments from those who haven't seen someone who looks like this that or the other; not all the intersectional categories have been covered. I feel it a bit myself; there's a lot of big evangelical charismatic mega-churches in that mix: Where are the "ordinary worshippers" who look more like me and mine? I've got a well-honed cynicism after years in this church game. The "what about me?" response is an understandable human reaction, but in this case I/we should get over it.

This song hasn't come from some tightly planned bureaucratic focus-group vetted process of fine-tuned diversity management. If there is anyone who has "made it happen" it's Tim Hughes (formerly of Soul Survivor, and now of Gas Street Church Birmingham) and his espoused attitude towards the song is commendable. It has come about from a loose arrangement of friends and networks and invited and offered contributions. It's organic and messy, and therefore not perfect. And that's good.

It also hits a pretty good balance regarding the spotlight and avoiding the sort of brand-driven recognition we often slip into. One of the *points* of this song is to show that the churches are alive and working together. So it needs some sense of being able to recognise people and places and names of congregations. It does a good job of avoiding the celebrity factor. People are not named, *churches* are. It's been released under a neutral brand. The naming of churches serves the

purpose of showing a community of communities without overdriving the brands. And I love knowing that there are Eastern Orthodox and Catholics and !Pentecostals and St. Someone's of Somewhere all in the mix.

For me, unlike other attempts at this sort of thing, this feels like my brothers and sisters, and I can sing with them. I *know* these faces. I have seen quite a few of them in real life. I've had conversations with a number of them. There's at least one face in that mix that I've served coffee to across my dining room table. The family of God is both bigger and smaller than we think.

Again, I'm good at cynicism. I've seen ego-driven light-show presentations done with not much more than a Christian aesthetic. This is not that. It's not absolutely pure and precise, but so what? It's a cracked-jar crumpled-paper offering of people who want to declare the love of God over a hurting nation. It is something to delight in.

The only thing that wears my heart, just a little, is this. There's not enough of Jesus. One of the cracks in our jar (that I think this current season is rubbing at, one of the loving disciplines of God for us right now) is that we have been in a rut of church being about church rather than church being about Jesus. The church *is* a blessing – but that's a truth of vocation (what we are called to and enabled to be) rather than identity (what we are by our own right in and of ourselves). The declaration at the end: "Our buildings may be closed... but the church is alive" is great, but it's unfortunate in that it's simply about us. It's the same with the blurb in the video description which is about *our* unity and *our* good works. It's almost there, but not quite. **We are only a blessing because Jesus is. We are only alive, because Jesus is. Let's say that.** We embody the blessing, but Jesus is the substance of it.

We're not singing ourselves over the nation, we are singing

the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Keep doing it.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Review: Trinitarian Self and Salvation

Can there be such a thing as a novel and new work in the area of theology? I suspect not, but there are places where our current thought, practice and doctrine so intertwine with both modern ecclesiastical intellect *and* the real world, that the exploration perforce covers old ground in new ways and towards new ends. Scott Harrower's *Trinitarian Self and Salvation* is one of these explorations.



This deeply theological book, a published doctoral thesis, is, in Harrower's own terms, an "Evangelical Engagement with *Rahner's Rule*." This is a theologically technical landscape to journey through and so it bears some explanation. It relates to our understanding of how the immanent Trinity (God as God is for all eternity) and the economic Trinity (God as God is revealed and acting in history) can be understood together. Harrower himself gives excellent background.

This axiom, RR, is defined as follows in Karl Rahner's classic work The Trinity: "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity." (Page 1)

Evangelicals with a high view of Scripture tend to choose

either of two approaches to RR... There is firstly the "strict realist reading" (SRR) of RR, secondly, a "loose realist reading" (LRR) of RR. (Page 3)

Quoting Olson, "interpreters of Rahner's Rule have tended to divide into two camps: those who believe in a strong identity of immanent and economic Trinity and those who would qualify that identity by positing a prior actuality of the immanent Trinity." (Page 6)

In other words, to borrow from Giles from Harrower's footnote on page 7, the SRR of RR connotes an *identification* between the economic and the immanent Trinity, and the LRR of RR connotes simply a *correlation* between the economic and immanent Trinity.

Harrower's focus is to assess the strength of the SRR of RR by means of an exegetical study of Luke-Acts. He does not focus on the *practical* implications of either the SRR or the LRR but they are there in the background.

The inclusion of Giles as a contemporary Evangelical theologian who "employs the LRR" (Page 7) brings to bear the sphere of subordinationism within the Trinity and the correlative theology of subordinationism in terms of gender roles. It may be over-simplifying but we can take the LRR to be a generally egalitarian view of God and the effects of salvation history, and the SRR to be, generally, a complementarian view that reads the subordination of Christ back into the very being of the Godhead and then extends its applicability to many, if not all, areas of life.

Harrower's method is simple enough. He unpacks the concepts, puts clarifying bounds on his terms, and then gives some detailed background on Rahner himself so that we can be clear about what is at stake. Rahner held to an SRR and it was here in this background information that my own interest began was

piqued. I found myself reading of thoughts and phrases that I myself had employed to speak of the Trinity (e.g. “[a theology] which only allows for the Son to become incarnate”, Page 34; “The Christology is thus a descending Christology in which Christ has his identity from God the Father’s expression of himself towards the world in the Logos as his symbol.”, Page 43). Was I SRR or LRR? I had reached the end of my previous thinking and now precision was expected of me!

The conclusion is made clear from the beginning – Harrower’s mission is to demonstrate the flaws of an SRR of RR. Should I be seeking to line up beside him or give a retort to each point made? The best theological journeys are the ones where you are not quite sure where you will end up.

Before his exegetical thrust the background includes some strictly theological reflections on the flaws of the SRR. Harrower has enumerated these from Page 46 under informative headings. I had a number of “I hadn’t thought of that” moments in this section. Consider these gems that struck me in particular:

- The strong identification of the economic with the immanent implies an essential necessity for God to be incarnate and therefore an essential reliance on creation/redemption in the very *being* of God. Can God still be God without creating and saving by this view? “...in Rahner’s theology God is dependent on the world for the fruition of his selfhood.” (Page 48)
- “Rahner’s axiom detracts from the incarnation because it asserts that God the Son’s relations with the other person of the Trinity in history must be exactly as they are for God the Son within God’s immanent self... Thus, the extent of the condescension of God in the incarnation, and salvation history as the context for the incarnation may have a reduced place in Rahner’s theology.” (Page 53). “Thus Rahner does not sufficiently deal with the two “states of Christ”: his humiliation

and glorification.” (Page 54)

This last point is key – the emphasis of the SRR elevates the fullness (or at least the precision) of the *revelation* of God in the incarnation – but this is at the expense of the *condescension* of God in the incarnation. The tension is clear, in Christ God brought all of himself, and at the same time emptied himself so that he might be, for us, the Son of Man, Messiah and Saviour. The SRR implies a complete (cost-free?) continuation of Trinitarian relationship before and after the incarnation. The LRR affirms that “the incarnation involved a change in the way in which God relates to himself as Trinity after God the Son took on human flesh.” (Page 59).

Harrower picks up this point a number of times throughout and it enables him to approach his exegesis of Luke-Acts through the Christological lens of the “messianic role” in which in the light of “his anticipated eschatological work and revelation, Jesus’ work in the economy of salvation is an incomplete revelation of who he is.” (Page 73). Harrower does not pursue it, but it would be an interesting exercise to thoroughly correlate the RR considerations with the hermeneutical perspective of the likes of N. T. Wright. The starting point might be this:

Jesus relates to the Father and the Spirit in a specific messianic manner which is a newly-structured relationality. To hold the contrary opinion, namely that the trinitarian relations in the economy of salvation are the unrestrained self-expression of God’s immanent taxis, is to lose sight of Jesus’ vocation as Messiah and its significance for Christian theology. (Page 79)

This understanding sets up Harrower’s basic exegetical argument: Take an element of the messianic shape of Christ’s ministry, apply the SRR to apply that shape to the essence of God, demonstrate the absurdity, inconsistency, or

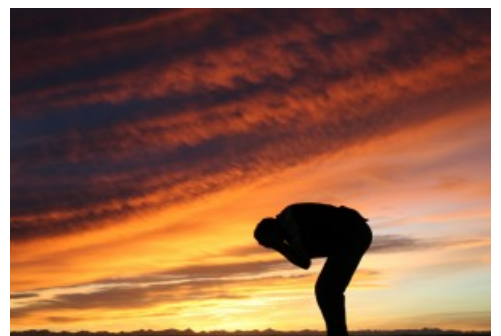
undesirability of that shape. The last two chapters exercises this argument by considering both Father-Son and Son-Holy Spirit relationships.

At the end of the journey that is this book I was left with varied thoughts. I was variously impressed, frustrated, intrigued, and challenged along the way. I am aware that because of its interaction with the subordinationism debate this is likely to be a book of some controversy, particularly in the Australian scene. As I was with Giles, I am sympathetic to Harrower's stance.

What I most desire having read this book is further engagement. I want to read a rebuttal. I will seek to find an opportunity to share a coffee and a discussion with the author. One thing is sure, Harrower's presence in the Australian and international theological academy is a welcome one and a worthy example of the next generation of Christian thought leaders.

Evangelical Examination of Conscience

For those with a Roman Catholic heritage an *Examination of Conscience* may be familiar. It's a series of questions, often based on the Ten Commandments or some form of catechism, which you are meant to ask of yourself before going to confession: Have I committed this or that sin? Have I had that wrong attitude? Where is my heart not right with God?



Being lumped together with confession it's something the evangelical church has shied away from. And not for no reason – at its worst, when mixed with penance instead of penitence an examination of conscience could be taken as a desperate attempt to unearth every wrongdoing in order to avoid the wrath of a vengeful god.

But at its best, when done in the light of the God of justice and mercy in whom forgiveness is a rock-solid given because of the cross of Christ, it is an act of devotion, a humble willingness to have oneself shaped for the Kingdom of God.

This is a thoroughly evangelical practice in line with the psalmist of Psalm 139:

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

In this I agree with David Gushee from a 2005 Christianity Today article where he sees in such examinations a “rich moral inventory” and decries the “staggering moral sloppiness that frequently characterises us” as evangelicals. And he asks:

Which evangelical traditions today train their adherents in the kind of rigorous self-examination represented by the Catholic tradition of the “examination of conscience”? The Puritans and the followers of Wesley used to engage in such practices, but they have largely disappeared.

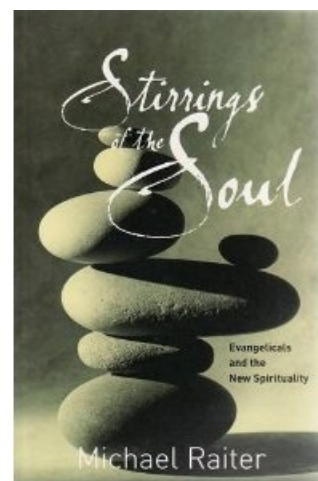
Which evangelical traditions today encourage the kind of daily self-examination and rigorous accountability represented by the evangelical Wilberforce? Can one find this kind of moral seriousness actively taught in any branch of the evangelical world?

Christianity is more than an event, an experience, or a set of beliefs. It is a way of life characterized by moral seriousness and the quest for holiness.

I recently put together an Examination of Conscience for an Ash Wednesday service. I did this by looking at a whole bunch of different resources, most of them catholic, and picking the good questions without losing the hard questions. It has been a worthwhile exercise.

Review: Stirrings of the Soul

Mike Raiter is someone I, and many others, would place in the extreme upper echelons of biblical exegetes and expositors. A book by Raiter that deals with spirituality therefore grabbed my attention. I was expecting something that interacted with my two passions of studying the things of God and experiencing the things of God. With *Stirrings of the Soul* I was not disappointed.



I will therefore begin by dealing with the three annoyances of this book so I can finish with the good stuff.

1. It's an Australian book, by an Australian author, based initially on lectures to an Australian audience. The adaption of it to a British audience is obviously forced and looks like it's been done by an editor with search-and-replace "Australian" with "British" functionality on their word processor. I'm all for adapting to market contexts, but...
2. Don't be put off by the beginning. Yes, working from the ground up is good. And yes, it was written in 2003 when 'The Internet' wasn't yet broadbandy, let alone all 2.0-ish. But the first couple of chapters talking about the "spirituality explosion" and the outlining of

postmodernity have dated significantly – it presumes a naivete about such things that has long since passed.

Persistence through these chapters is worthwhile because the strength of the book lies in its dealing with more eternal concepts.

3. The structure of the book moves from New Age spirituality to Mysticism-in-general to Christian Mysticism to an Evangelical Response to Christian Mysticism. What you don't get is the completed circle (or the finished return journey) of an Evangelical Response to New Age spirituality. How does a Christian respond to a New Age mystic? I don't know if this book fully answers that. I think it does more to protect against New Age infiltration into the Christian world than it does to help the Christian world to outreach to the New Age. In this way it is typical Matthias Media and can come across on occasion as an extended *Briefing* article.

There is plenty of good stuff. Raiter achieves his aim of not pulling apart one form of mysticism in depth but looks at the forest more than the trees. What he slowly reveals is that this spiritualistic forest is very human shaped. Raiter lists the following characteristics within the appeal of spirituality:

1. *Hunger for relationship (p75)*
2. *Thirst for experience (p80)*
3. *Non-rational (p84)*
4. *Non Judgmental (p86)*
5. *Inclusive (p89)*
6. *Everyday Spirituality (p92)*
7. *Market Place Spirituality (p95)*
8. *Therapeutic (p98)*
9. *An Immanent, Inner-directed Spirituality (p99)*

Not only are these found across the breadth of (post)modern

spiritualities of today but also across history. The point is that the appeal of spirituality is a common thread in the human fallen predicament. Not only the God-shaped hole, but also the methods of spiritual enlightenment that rely on human endeavour or self-focussed technique, are indicative of human pride and self-realisation.

By this means Raiter brings Scripture to bear on these spiritualities and this is where his exegetical mastery kicks in. And he is somewhat no-holds-barred in doing so. I delight in the application of Romans that acknowledges that the base state of the human person is not to seek truth but “in their wickedness, suppress or restrain or hold the truth back.” (p109) and he concludes...

*“As we live in a society of so many competing spiritualities we desperately need to hear Paul’s words on the human condition. We need to listen to God’s diagnosis of the real character of people’s spiritual motivations. We can be tempted to look at the new spirituality... and see it as the genuine longing of sincere spiritual seekers... People are looking for God and longing to get in contact with the One they know is there... There is, of course, an element of truth in all that. **The phenomenal growth of the new spirituality does point to people’s awareness of the presence of God. But, says Paul, such movements are not the signposts of spiritual seekers. They are in reality, the hallmarks of spiritual hiders, of religious runaways, of deniers of the Divine.**” (p118, emphasis mine)*

It may seem harsh, but this attitude of Paul (both a “passion” and a “revulsion”, p130) is at the heart of Paul’s evangelistic zeal and his desire to connect with, but not commend, those who build spiritual idols but need Jesus.

Here Raiter’s engagement with the world outside of the Christian sphere ends. The second half of the book looks at

spirituality (in the guise of mysticism) within the church. He presents something of an overview and introduces some key figures (Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila etc.). He considers ascetism, quietness and other spiritual disciplines. He looks at the philosophical foundations in neoplatonism. His critique is helpfully Christocentric

“If the Lord has told us about himself and how he wants us to relate to him, then we will want to listen to him, and listen to him carefully. We will want to respond to him in the way that best pleases him, and therefore in the way which will both change and transform us, and bring us the most God-honouring joy... Yet here are mystical classics where the Lord of glory is barely mentioned, and the benefits of his atoning death are misunderstood or marginalised.” (p174)

I appreciate that he does not ignore the over-reactions to spirituality. In the last chapter he critiques evangelicalism and the tendency to reject emotion, not just emotionalism, and to glorify gospel more than Jesus. The balance that Raiter strikes is commendable – it hits the truth point between the two reactive edges of charismania and dry dogmatism (for whom the chief end of man is to “read the Bible and study it forever”! – p224). In the second last chapter Raiter paints a picture of Christian Spirituality as portrayed in Romans 8. It is a piece of exegetical wisdom which seems good to conclude with:

“Firstly, the spiritual life is intimately related to the saving work of God in Christ...

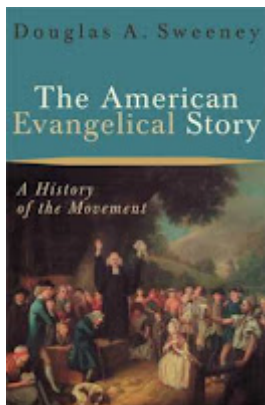
Secondly, for Paul spirituality, or life in the Spirit, was much more about living a life of righteousness, than performing personal and private acts of devotion...

Thirdly, Christian spirituality recognises the importance of the mind in pursuing a life pleasing to God...

Fourthly, there is a deeply experiential dimension to an encounter with the Spirit of God...

Fifthly, suffering is the context in which Christian spirituality is lived out...
Sixthly, frustration will be one aspect of life in the Spirit for each and every believer.” (pp203-208)

Review: The American Evangelical Story



Of all the sorts of books that I've read since leaving College six and a half years ago books about church history have been in the minority.

It's rather strange really – I enjoyed studying church history and have found it of immense importance when considering future and present church issues, particular church planting and “fresh expression” strategies. I find a lot of church planting theory irrelevant and/or paternalistic – description invalidly turned to prescription. In general, you can learn more from a good account of real stuff that has happened.

And so I picked up Douglas Sweeney's *The American Evangelical Story* on special one day. It is a short book, an overview. It was cheap, relatively light, but a good way back into this part of the discipline. I chose the topic because the contemporary American church is so important but I do not understand it's roots well. After reading this book my understanding his improved.

It helped remind me that there is nothing new under the sun.

- We see young guns in 1741 failing to keep connected to the previous generation (“James Davenport... denounced New Haven’s minister from the pulpit of his own church – while he was sitting in the audience!” Page 56).
- Charismatic experiences of the ilk of the Toronto Blessing are not new (“Signs and wonders appeared all around, as hundreds of worshipers, slain in the Spirit, barked like dogs, jerked uncontrollably, fell into trances, danced, and shouted.” Page 72)
- The tendency to compromise the gospel for pragmatic purposes is not new (With reference to preaching to slaves, “Some of them promised never to preach on God’s deliverance of the Israelites from their bondage to the Egyptians... the pact they made with these masters led to distortions in their preaching and wound up helping the masters more than it did the slaves.” Page 110)
- We even have reference to Old and New Calvinism – not in 2009, but 1700’s! (Page 58).

I was already partly familiar with the early chapters – it is covered in most histories of the Reformation and also the Wesleyan times. It was the last two chapters that I found particular helpful. These deal with the rise of Pentecostalism, and neoevangelicalism – the two broad aspects of American Evangelicalism which have direct effects today.

With regard to Pentecostalism I was intrigued with how the ancestry of Pentecostalism derives quite clearly from Methodism and the influence of the Great Awakening. The characteristic of a “second blessing” spirituality is present:

“The early Methodists maintained a goal of entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, which they believed could had by faith during a supernatural “second blessing” from God. After conversion, Wesley taught, God continues to work within us, putting to death the deeds of the flesh and

consecrating our lives for him. However, there comes a point for many when, dissatisfied with incremental progress in the faith, they seek and receive a second work of uniquely supernatural grace that lifts them to a new level of evangelical piety. Now entirely sanctified, they no longer want to commit sin.” (Page 135)

I had not realised this link from the Holiness movement through the likes of Charles Parham, linking up with the momentum of African American spirituality in William Seymour, producing the Azusa Street revival that is considered the “birth” of American Pentecostalism. It was useful to see it and Sweeney does well to show how the Azusa Street revival drew from many differing aspects of the Awakenings that preceded it, crossing denominational, gender, and race boundaries as it did so.

Sweeney continues the path into the post-second-world-war era and shows the impact of Pentecostalism on the mainstream in the Charismatic Movement. We can see the roots of the likes of John Wimber and Fuller Seminary. This is a good perspective. He doesn't go much beyond this, however, and we do not get an insight into the upsurge in prosperity doctrine moving churches away from classical Pentecostalism in the 1980's and 90's.

The final chapter, unpacking the “fundamentalist controversy” of the early twentieth century, gave me insight into the groundwork of “neoevangelicals” like Billy Graham after the second world war. I did not realise the issues that both separated and connected these two generations. Sweeney speaks of

“those who stayed in the mainline until the early twentieth century defending their faith – and seeking to keep control of the mainline Protestant churches – in an age beset by new mental and social challenges (fundamentalists); and those who

regrouped after they lost the mainline Protestant institutions, building their own, mainly parachurch, web of evangelical ministries from which they would succeed in reengaging American culture (neoevangelicals)” (Page 156)

It was in this last chapter that I could see a direct influence on, and a parallel to, the controversy within the Anglican Church at the moment. Here are evangelicals wrestling with the priority of gospel ministry, the place of politics and institutional power-games, and the unchanged points of attack from liberalism. Niehbuhr’s quote about liberalism – “a God without wrath [who] brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment thorough the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” (Page 161) – speaks from that era to this time.

Not that the evangelical side is completely lacking in blame, however. I was intrigued with the portrayal of how the influence of dispensationalism and premillennialism on the evangelical gospel over-spiritualised it and removed it from grassroots activities and social reform that had previously been motivated by the “postmillennial hopes of many early evangelicals” (Page 163). I think this is a particular aspect I would like to explore further.

Sweeney’s conclusions are strong. In particular his point that “at its best, evangelicalism functions as a renewal movement within the larger, universal church” (Page 184) should be taken as an exhortation to “stay in” and reform: “Otherwise we will lose our impact on the larger Christian church.” (Page 184).

I’m glad I read this book and getting my feet back into the pool of Church History. Sweeney’s overview was a good place to begin.

