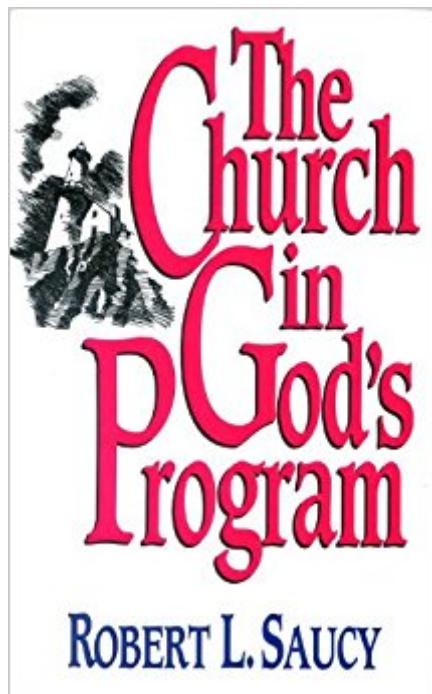


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The Church In God's Program



Synopsis

The Church in God's Program is a biblical study covering the entire scope of the church - its beginning, government, ministries, and the new covenant.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A very solid analysis of the New Testament teaching about the doctrine and practice of the Church . . . careful exposition, ample footnotes, scriptural centricity throughout.-Central Baptist Theological Seminary VoiceThe Church in God's Program provides logical answers to contemporary church issues--answers backed by Scripture.-Lutheran Journal

ROBERT L. SAUCY (Westmont College, Dallas Theological Seminary) is a distinguished professor of systematic theology at Talbot Theological Seminary. He previously served as president of the Evangelical Theological Society and addresses that group frequently. He is author of numerous books, including The Church in God's Program, and is the editor of Women and Men in Ministry: A Complementary Perspective. His shorter works have appeared in many journals including Bibliotheca Sacra, Grace Theological Journal, and Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society. Dr. Saucy resides in Anaheim, California.

Definitely not the best biblical study book I've read. Good points are, it is very detailed and fairly well organized in presenting Scriptural information. But even as a Baptist, I found his clear bias toward

Baptist interpretations weakened his hermeneutics, because rather than giving good exegetical reasons for his interpretations, he consistently takes the quickest route possible to come to his conclusions and breeze over the "problem" texts for, say, believers baptism and congregational rule. Since I was specifically looking for defenses of my positions against challenges brought by someone of another branch of Christianity, I found that quite disappointing. Since it's also too dry for edification reading, I think its best use is for reference or help with particular topics of ecclesiology.

Robert Saucy has written a helpful book that aims to define the New Testament's teaching on the doctrine of the church. Saucy believes that this book will help resolve problems facing the church today because the Scriptures is sufficient to offer guidelines to resolve those problems. Saucy contends that "progress in the churches comes not from advancing beyond the biblical patterns but from building squarely upon them." That is a very clarifying statement. The issue is not simply that the church isn't doing enough but is the church standing on the right foundation? Saucy divides the book into two main logical divisions. The first is defining the life of the church or what he calls the organism of the church. He examines the meaning of the word Church not from its etymology but how it was used from a word used meant as a general assembly that developed into the more technical term for an assembly of believers gathered in the name of the Lord. The second is defining the organization of the church covering structure, discipline, and ordinances of the church. Saucy provides a great resource that is technical in parts to show the development of Christ's church as He builds it while offering the veracity of Scripture to demonstrate God's design and purpose for His church. **Strengths** One obvious strength of the book is how biblical its arguments are. Every argument laid out is supported by a number of thoughtfully chosen Scripture passages. This book is for the student of Scripture and displays exegetical care in handling simple conjunctions like kai in Gal 6:16 with utmost care. Based on sound hermeneutics the author presents a very clear and helpful explanation of the distinction between the church and Israel. Maybe my bias is showing here but he does offer a variety of views in how Gal 6:16 can be taken but concludes that Paul's usage of Israel always refers to ethnic Israel and never the church. He goes further by explaining the biblical use and meaning of "the seed of Abraham" as having three areas of application: 1) the natural descendants of Abraham, (e.g. ethnic Jews), 2) reference to Christ Himself (Gal 3:16) where the ultimate posterity of Abraham is embodied in Christ, and 3) the logical conclusion of applications 1 + 2 which is that all (Jewish people) who are in Christ are spiritually of the true spiritual seed of Abraham. He makes a

clarifying statement, “all Israelites can be called Abraham’s seed, only those of faith are Abraham’s true seed who will inherit the promises. The primary significance is therefore spiritual, and this spiritual seed is made up of true Israel as well as those outside Israel.” He summarizes that even though both the Church and Israel are descendants of Abraham one does not equate to the other but Abraham is the father of both. He supports this by quoting Romans 4:11-12 where Abraham, “the father of circumcision to them are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of faith of our father Abraham, which he had yet being uncircumcised.” He also offers a very clarifying statement regarding how to think through the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant of Jer 31:33. He says, “the old covenant [Mosaic covenant] could only command response, the new covenant contained provisions to effect it. The key provisions were the gracious forgiveness of sins (Jer 31:34) and the writing of the law in the heart through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit (v. 33). The result of this latter provision would be the universal knowledge of God (v. 34a). ”

Weakness One area of weakness would be to offer balance in explaining the relation of the covenants. A lot of ink covered the relation of the Mosaic Covenant to the New Covenant but the Davidic Covenant as an amplification of the Abrahamic Covenant was only a sentence long. One area of strength was his evaluation of the three main views of church polity which are episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational by citing biblical evidence and weaknesses for each. Surprisingly he admits that Presbyterian (elder-rule) is the example shown in Scripture saying, “The NT presents clear evidence that the care of the church was committed to elders.” He cites numerous verses to support that clear evidence yet he concludes that congregational rule is the correct view, “the biblical data presents a basic congregational form of church government with local autonomy and a basic democracy.” I do appreciate that he uses the phrase “a congregational form” since his view is not typical congregationalism where the congregation rules primarily. There is an emphasis on elder ruling with the church involved. I did find his argument using Rev 2-3 where the Spirit writes to the churches as an implication weak. He says, “responsibilities imply authority to carry them out, thus arguing for the final authority of the church as a whole.” Could it be that the 7 churches in Asia Minor were being judged as a whole for their sin (with the exception of 2) and not because Christ viewed the church as a whole the ruling government? I wish Saucy would have kept that format of stating a position, showing biblical evidence, summarizing and concluding based on that evidence throughout the book.

Conclusion In the main I found the whole book incredibly helpful. One area that grabbed my

attention was the section on the true purpose or mission of the church was helpful. The church can fail if it loses its focus on preaching the Gospel of Christ. He says, “history reveals that the church can fail in its ministry to the world in one of two ways. It may attempt to rule through deliberately entering secular forms, or it may withdraw to individual monastic piety. Both result in a faulting of responsibility toward the world”¹ the other extreme of leaving the ministry of the word in an attempt to witness through the more direct secular power has always tempted the church.. by casting aside its influence through the Word in favor of secular forms such as politics and business, the church loses its function as the servant of God.² How do Christians balance this? Saucy shows that the passages of good works (Matt 5:16; 1Peter 2:12; 3:1) are all intended to cause others to acknowledge God and glorify Him. In other words our involvement in politics and other secular forms is not for reformation but salvation. Our good works are to apply “in all areas of men’s lives, and then lived by each believer in the contacts with the world in which the Lord of the church has stationed him for a witness.”³ This provides not only balance to political involvement but also in our evangelism. Saucy offers four aims for the church: toward the world (evangelism), toward itself (edification), and toward God (giving God glory in all things). Overall Saucy achieves his goal of explaining directly from the Scriptures God’s purpose and guidelines for His Church. He writes winsomely and fairly on the more divisive positions regarding the polity of the church, the gifts of the church, and the ordinances of the church.

Though slightly outdated, Robert Saucy’s (pronounced Socee) work still stands as one of the best-written works to date on a biblical doctrine of the church. I will try to be brief here because this work covers so much ground. I will respond to three points his work touches upon. First, Saucy explains clearly the three main approaches to church government: Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Congregational. Though the author favors and stands with the final of these options, he does see helpful elements in each perspective and affirms that scripture does not dogmatically say which form was strictly employed by New Testament teaching and practice. Since my tradition aligns with his, that of the Bible Church Movement and Baptist Congregationalism, I tend to favor his views of church government and leadership. Do I think it always works? Absolutely not. In fact, I think our present culture calls for a revising of our approach to church government and structure. A reassessment needs to be done in this area since this idea of authority has been so fleeting in congregational churches. I think Saucy would agree. Because of this, I tend to favor the Presbyterian, elder-rule government structure. I think it gives clearer testimony to the authority

invested in those he has "called" to vocational service. Though I agree with Saucy's definition of "calling" and "vocational leaders" (you'll need to read his work to get a full picture here), I feel that it still fails to do justice to the idea of church authority (or leadership) of a congregation. Though I love concepts of the Brethren movement (both open and exclusive), just as an example, I simply cannot see how those types of movements (or independent congregations) have lasting impact in rapidly-changing cultures. There is no connectivity, no "visible" authority to lead as the extended incarnation of Christ on earth (meaning his church). The gift of pastor/teacher being defined as just something "anyone can do" who allocates their full time (to paraphrase Saucy loosely) tends to depreciate the authority vested in the care giver of Christ's local body. I would agree in principle with what Saucy is saying. I hold to the priesthood of the believer so I absolutely agree in principle. But in practical application this idea of "anyone can be a pastor" tends to depreciate the gift of pastor/teacher. It is clear that every Christian has been called to vocationally serve Christ, the church, and the world (Eph. 4:1), but not every person is given the gift of pastor/teacher. Once again, I agree with all of what Saucy says in principle, I just don't think this approach (congregational autonomy from other local bodies) works well in our present culture. Secondly, Saucy does an excellent job speaking on church sacraments and the church as a mystery entity in God's program in human history. Saucy is clearly Dispensational (though he clearly aligns himself with the Progressive movement, 1986-present) in his approach and understanding of the nature and purpose of Christ's church. I find much similarity in my thinking here and appreciate his thinking which highlights a system of greater discontinuity than most give. Believe me, I love my brothers and sisters in Christ who hold to different perspectives, but I really feel like this approach puts biblical-redemptive narrative and history together more succinctly. Thirdly, his beliefs in the sacraments are largely symbolic, but tend to add an element of "real presence" as Calvin and the Reformed community have traditionally held. In the end, he lines up more with the "memorial" view and non-conformist tradition. I honestly don't mind either view as I think either can be defended from scripture well. In conclusion, I really don't think there is a more helpful introductory book for men and women preparing themselves for church ministry (in whatever form that might be). Though the book stands as an "academic", it is written in an assessable way and is readable. It deals with a teaching that has been really misconstrued within the present church, simply, "What is the Church?" and "What is its life and function?" Overall, I still believe this book is one of the best on Protestant ecclesiology. The Christian church truly is indebted to Robert Saucy for his contribution to this area of thinking. An excellent work meant to be read, reread, and referenced time and again.

A must have for seminary students and beginning pastors.

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