

REVIEWS



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THE CHURCH AND THE CRISIS OF COMMUNITY



In many struggling towns and cities, the biggest hurdle isn't a lack of opportunity but a lack of fellowship.

BY MICAH WATSON

ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHAN SCHMITZ / FOLIO ART

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Nowadays, as each new presidential election approaches, commentators are in the habit forecasting the most pivotal contest of our lifetime, if not all of American history. But despite such overheated claims, some elections may actually mark unusually important turning points. In retrospect, 2016 seems a likely candidate, and there is no shortage of analyses or theories to help us make sense of it.

In *Alienated America: Why Some Places Thrive and Others Collapse* ★★★★★, *Washington Examiner* writer Timothy Carney uses the 2016 election as an opportunity to consider the overall health of our body politic and the “American Dream.” Like the best guides, Carney goes beyond shedding light on “horse race” factors like polling data, campaign strategies, and county-by-county deep dives. James Madison may have exaggerated a bit in *Federalist 51* when he asked, rhetorically, whether government was the greatest of all reflections on human nature, but the intensity of our political moment does open a revealing window into more than election returns.

Why are some communities doing so well? Why are others languishing? Why are some places characterized by healthy signs of civic life and human flourishing, like strong marriages, vibrant schools,

job growth, and safe neighborhoods with book clubs and bowling leagues? Why are others afflicted with rising rates of suicide, opioid addiction, separated families, and economic stagnation? And why were people living in the latter places most likely to provide Donald Trump with his strongest support in the primaries, even before the motivation of voting against Hillary Clinton could factor in? *Alienated America* tackles these questions.

A SENSE OF DESPAIR

Carney’s work falls in the same neighborhood as Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* and *Our Kids*, as well as recent titles from conservative thinkers like Charles Murray (*Falling Apart*) and Yuval Levin (*Our Fractured Republic*). While conservative-leaning himself, Carney does not harken back to an American golden age. Nor does he exclusively criticize the usual liberal suspects but instead takes aim at both right and left. (He even defends a role for labor unions!)

The book is eminently readable, weaving together personal anecdotes from Carney’s travels throughout the country with accessible but not dumbed-down synopses and applications of sophisticated social science data. Measured against the heated nature of our political moment and the controversy surrounding many of the topics he tackles, Carney comes across as a refreshing voice and friendly guide, his tone irenic and his approach straightforward.

One virtue of Carney’s approach is that he resists easy, totalizing explanations. What led so many voters to favor Donald Trump in areas that had previously gone Democratic? Why are some places doing poorly and others doing well? It is too easy to attribute these outcomes purely to economic factors. It is also too easy, not to mention downright uncharitable, to identify racism as the overriding factor, much less to taunt “these people” for essentially deserving their lot in life.

Without denying the role of economics and race in today’s divided America, Carney argues

that the fundamental culprit in many towns is a sense of despair, a feeling that the community lacks meaningful opportunity, human connection, and ultimately hope. This despair has many causes, and Carney explores how big business, the changing nature of manufacturing, the breakdown of marriage and family, growing secularism, overcentralization, and the rise of what he calls hyper-individualism all have fueled the alienation that led many to put their hope in a rough-and-tumble strongman who vowed to solve their problems.

Readers will find some aspects of Carney’s work more persuasive than others. A handful of observations struck me as particularly noteworthy. The first is the surprising connection between the ill-effects of overcentralization and hyper-individualism. Carney paints a telling picture of how the reach of government into more and more areas of life crowds out the efforts of small and mid-size charities and churches. This overreach can create what Abraham Kuyper called an octopus-like entanglement of state tentacles poking into properly non-governmental spheres.

But Carney presses beyond the conventional “big government” critique, noting as well how big business and retail giants like Wal-Mart leave their own centralizing footprint, crowding out smaller competitors with deeper roots in the community. For all the blessings of a wider supply of goods available at lower prices, there are civic costs that are no less real for being harder to quantify.

An increase in top-down centralization has gone hand in hand with rising

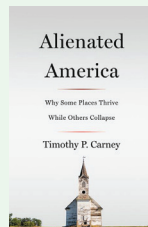
WHAT IF THE PROBLEM OF ALIENATION CANNOT BE SOLVED BY IMPOSING A LARGE-SCALE PLAN RATIFIED BY POLITICIANS AND IMPLEMENTED BY POLICY EXPERTS?

individualism, whether measured by the sexual revolution and the breakdown of the family, the growth of secularism and the shuttering of churches, or economic and technological changes that make it easier to avoid interacting with real people, let alone neighbors. We have garages rather than front porches, we use Uber rather than calling a friend for a ride, and we summon strangers to take care of our pets via apps rather than asking a neighbor. Taken alone, none of these developments is necessarily damning. But the cumulative effect of government overreach and metastasized individualism has, in many places, hollowed out the “middle institutions”—churches, charities, clubs, volunteer organizations—that offer the fellowship and support needed for human flourishing. It is not good for men and women to be alone—Carney knows his Scripture (and his Aristotle). These middle institutions furnish something we can’t get from a federal program or through our own efforts: a sense of belonging, of mattering to others.

A second aspect of the book worth highlighting is the lessons Carney draws from communities that flourish, including wealthy enclaves like Chevy Chase, Maryland, and close-knit, highly religious areas like Oostburg in Wisconsin, Western Michigan, and Utah. Chevy Chase and elite neighborhoods like it are the furthest thing from Trump territory, yet they have much in common with Dutch Reformed outposts like Oostburg and Utah’s Mormon strongholds: a flourishing network of middle institutions, remarkably high marriage rates, economic opportunity, and strong bonds of civic identity. Regarding the family-and-marriage habits of the secular elite, Carney reminds his fellow conservative Christians that “those liberal elites *practice* what we *preach*.”

But even if elites may practice (if not preach) a certain “success sequence”—graduating from high school, then securing a full-time job, then getting married, then having children—there’s no guarantee that their example will filter downward. Moreover, American elites often take measures to ensure that their slices of the American dream remain off-limits to the less fortunate. That’s the problem with elites: By definition, there can only be so many, and so it will hardly suffice to tell people living in dying towns that the path to salvation lies in joining their “betters.”

There are, however, alternatives. The Dutch Reformed living in Oostburg, Orange City in Iowa, and Western Michigan aren’t elites by most secular measures. Nor are the Mormons in Salt Lake City or the Muslims Carney visited in Toledo, Ohio. But Carney, drawing from Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, discusses the crucial role of religious communities in combating alienation.



Alienated America: Why Some Places Thrive While Others Collapse
TIMOTHY P. CARNEY
Harper Collins

One does not simply move into Chevy Chase, Maryland, or Princeton, New Jersey—not without a sizable income, at least. But one can walk into church (or synagogue or mosque) almost anywhere in the country for free. This oversimplifies, of course, and the book goes into more detail, but two of Carney’s most interesting arguments are, first, the political claim that secularization gave us Trump, and second, the deeper sociological (and spiritual) claim that churches and other bodies of worship are a crucial component of thriving societies that have, thus far, fended off the debilitating malaise that afflicts so many people in so many places.

HUMAN EMBROIDERY

In the closing chapter of *Alienated America*, Carney considers solutions to the problems he’s spent the previous chapters describing. Here one hopes for a detailed 10-step plan or an innovative platform to be implemented by the party of one’s choice.

But what if the problem of alienation cannot be solved by imposing a large-scale plan ratified by politicians and implemented by policy experts? Carney does mention various ideas that can help here and there, such as ending the mortgage-interest tax break to encourage real neighborhoods and scaling back government regulation to give more room for voluntary organizations. Yet he doubts whether top-down solutions can deliver us from our predicament—or whether the challenges we face are truly *national* in the first place.

Throughout the book, Carney references and comments on the prayer of Jeremiah to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (29:7). For most of his readers, Carney’s message is simple: to *connect* with people through local organizations and groups, whether that means going to church, sponsoring a youth sports team, or working for side-walks suitable for biking. In other words, embrace the sort of small-scale human embroidery that cultivates close-knit community and fosters meaning, purpose, and fellowship. Christians can affirm this call without treating Carney’s modest ideas as the whole of the story, on a spiritual or even political level (a claim the author wisely avoids).

In *Alienated America*, Carney proves himself an invaluable guide, not only for looking back at a historically divisive election but also in looking forward with eyes to see how Christians and other people of goodwill can seek the prosperity of our neighborhoods, towns, and cities.

CT

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Re-Orienting Romans

Theologian Jackson W. brings East Asian perspectives to bear on Paul's most famous epistle. INTERVIEW BY JAYSON GEORGES

For much of the church's history, Christians have brought Western cultural assumptions to their reading of Scripture. But as the church's geographic center of gravity has shifted from the West to the Majority World, believers across the globe have come forward to offer fresh insights on God's Word. Among them is Jackson W. (a pseudonym), a theologian teaching at an Asian seminary whose latest book, *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes: Honor and Shame in Paul's Message and Mission*, reexamines the apostle's famous letter. Missiologist Jayson Georges, coauthor of *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials*, spoke with Jackson about the value of bringing East Asian perspectives to bear on the message of Romans.

The ideas in *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes* emerged from both your research and overseas ministry experience. Can you share some of the story behind the book?

For some time, I've noticed confusion stemming from the way Western Christians evangelize and explain Christianity to people in China. Whether you talk about certain terms, concepts, or emphases, there is a basic disconnect. However, the Bible has several themes that make more sense to a typical person in East Asia: specifically, issues related to honor, shame, and group identity.

At the same time, many Westerners overlook the significance of honor and shame in the Bible and the Christian life.

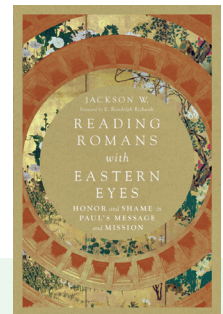
Their reading of Romans minimizes the importance of honor and shame. For them, Romans is definitive proof that legal categories trump all other metaphors and concepts in Scripture. So I figured I would make my case from perhaps the most so-called "legal" book in the New Testament. If we can see the pervasive influence of honor-shame dynamics in Romans, then clearly these are critical categories of thought that should shape how we read the entire Bible.

How does reading Paul's letter through an "honor-shame lens" help us understand his argument?

One major theme is collective identity. For most readers, Paul is speaking to individuals about being saved from sin and then sanctified as they walk in the Spirit. But that oversimplification misses a more fundamental concern that underlies Paul's letter—*who* is God's family?

The Jew-Gentile divide is central to Paul. God's promise to Abraham to bless all nations is at the crux of Paul's theology. God's honor is at stake. Will he keep his promises? If Paul's Jewish opponents are correct to say that people must become Jews as a prerequisite to becoming God's people, then God cannot keep his promise from Genesis 12:3, which Paul explicitly calls "the gospel" in Galatians 3:8.

What's more, reading Romans with an honor-shame lens helps us see more subtle dynamics at play. For instance, when Paul recounts Israel's story and her presumption of divine favor, he makes a subtle yet superb argument against the mindset held by certain readers. Many Romans saw themselves as "Greek," which implied that they were full of wisdom and the cultural envy of the world. They looked down on non-Greeks, who were derided as "barbarians." However, it is this "backward" group of people in Spain to whom Paul professes a desire to preach the gospel (Rom. 15:24). He wants assistance from the Roman church but worries that the cultural pride of its members might discourage them from supporting his mission. So Paul recasts the Romans in the role of ancient Jews and the barbarians in the place of Gentiles.



Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes: Honor and Shame in Paul's Message and Mission
JACKSON W.
IVP Academic

Can you point to particular passages in Romans that an honor-shame lens helps us better interpret?

In Romans 9–11, Paul draws from multiple Old Testament passages that are heavily shaped by honor and shame. Many people are familiar with Romans 10:13, which quotes Joel 2:32: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” But ask yourself, “Saved from what?” If you look closer at Joel 2, the prophet answers the question two times, saying, “never again will my people be shamed” (v. 26–27).

Also, Romans 9:33 and 10:11 are especially interesting. In a span of 12 verses, Paul twice draws from the same passage, Isaiah 28:16. In Romans 9, he renders it like this: “See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame.” Paul’s letters weave together logically tight arguments. He tends to be rather economical with his words. It raises the question: Why does Paul repeat himself? Why does the language of “put to shame” appear in the context of so many passages he quotes in Romans? When we explore these observations, we find that honor and shame link several critical themes within Romans.

In recent decades, New Testament scholars have debated the purpose and theology of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Some align with the “New Perspective” on Paul, which emphasizes the corporate dimensions of salvation, while others prefer an older understanding that stresses individual guilt and atonement. How does your interpretation relate to these conversations?

I agree with several scholars who argue that both “perspectives” are right but in different ways. It’s not necessary for us to pick one over the other.

I believe Romans has a strong collectivist bent. Group identity is a fundamental theme throughout the letter. This point is consistent with the so-called “New Perspective.” However, there is much to affirm with respect to the “Old” or “Traditional” perspective. Paul’s message very much concerns

individual salvation. While Romans certainly deals with the matter of church unity, that concern does not set aside questions about what it means to be justified through faith in Christ.

Reading Romans with an Eastern lens helps bring the two perspectives into balance. The two views complement one another, akin to a “yin-yang” relationship. Paul rebuts the notion that salvation is limited to a particular socio-ethnic identity. With the coming of Christ, belonging to one particular nation, like Israel, does not confer saving benefits that are denied to outsiders. Wedding the two “perspectives” in this way yields many other helpful insights.

People sometimes observe how honor and shame are becoming more prevalent in American culture, particularly among millennials. How might Western believers benefit from an Eastern perspective on Romans?

All cultures are infused with honor-shame dynamics, not merely East Asian cultures. However, it’s sometimes hard to see the cultural subtleties of our own context. By intentionally taking on an “Eastern” perspective, we become more attuned to similar aspects of honor-shame within an American setting.

Within an American context, several applications come to mind. For instance, we can express the meaning of faith in ways that reflect the ideas in Romans. We have faith in the One whom we want to honor and whose praise we seek. To have faith in Christ entails pursuing his glory and praise. Furthermore, the gospel transforms our perspective about what is worthy of praise or shame. Like Christ, we seek God’s glory in ways that redefine social honor or status.

Also, reading Romans from an Eastern perspective alerts us to the central importance of the church, our fundamental group identity as followers of Christ. In fact, we regain a long-forgotten truth among Christians, that salvation entails a change in collective identity. The gospel transforms how we distinguish insiders and outsiders. What’s more, if we really want to love others, we need a proper sense of shame and must grasp the importance of honoring others, as Paul explains throughout Romans. **CT**

NEW & NOTEWORTHY FICTION

Chosen by Paul Willis, professor of English at Westmont College.

Mysterium

SUSAN FRODERBERG

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

Susan Froderberg’s *Mysterium* is based on an actual, ill-fated Himalayan expedition in 1976, led by the American professor Willi Unsoeld. The climb succeeded, but at the terrible cost of Unsoeld’s daughter, who was named for the mountain (Nanda Devi) itself. Over 40 years later, Froderberg transposes this climb into something eerie, elemental, and coldly transcendent. Don’t expect to warm up to the characters on these icy slopes; they remain at a curious distance as they struggle through rockslides, blizzards, love affairs, rivalries, avalanches, and altitude. And yet the novel ends with an evocation of the sublime that has depended on this distance all along.

The Overstory

RICHARD POWERS NORTON

The Overstory provides an even greater challenge, for its main character is the forest itself. There is a scattering of human characters who are interlinked, sometimes unconsciously, by their sensitivity to elms, oaks, and redwoods as a sentient, palpable force. But the human stories are curiously discontinuous. What takes center stage is the remarkable presence of the trees themselves and how they literally communicate with one another and the world. The prophet Isaiah was onto something: The trees really do clap their hands (55:12).

Port William Novels & Stories:

The Civil War to World War II

WENDELL BERRY LIBRARY OF AMERICA

Readers in search of a more traditional connection to human characters will appreciate this handsome compilation of Wendell Berry’s Kentucky fiction. The volume contains four novels—*Nathan Coulter*, *A Place on Earth*, *A World Lost*, and *Andy Catlett: Early Travels*—and 23 short stories, arranged by the chronology of their common setting: Berry’s fictionalized town of Port William. (A second volume will soon follow.) Berry’s Christian concerns are everywhere clear in the way his characters strive to do right by one another and by the land they so carefully farm. Who needs a mountain when you have a mule-drawn plow?

Taking Risks of Outrageous Love

Why boundary-crossing friendships are part of the Christian calling. BY BRANDON J. O'BRIEN

Friend has become a spongy concept in the span of my lifetime. Supposedly, I become a “friend” of public radio, the library, or the animal shelter by making a donation. “Friend” me on social media and you gain access to a carefully curated (hence mostly phony) account of my life, all in exchange for becoming a potential target for my next book launch or multilevel marketing effort. My kids are encouraged to refer to every other student at school as their “friend,” including the ones they never meet.

But I had never considered that “friend” could refer to a co-conspirator in a subversive act of faith that defies racial, cultural, and political powers to testify to the kingdom of God. Not, at least, until I read Dana Robert’s *Faithful Friendships: Embracing Diversity in Christian Community* ★★★★★.

Robert, an expert on global Christianity, makes a more measured claim. “Christians,” she argues, “have the responsibility to make friends across divisions that can separate us from one another.” She insists that cultivating these friendships is “an ethical and spiritual imperative.” These risk-taking “faithful friendships” are mustard seeds of hope that may have generational, regional, and even global impact. But whether they change the world or not is beside the point. The point is, boundary-crossing friendships are part of the Christian calling. “When followers of Jesus Christ retreat from the personal responsibility to create diverse and loving communities,” Robert claims, “they betray the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Robert begins by showing how Jesus “befriends those who follow him” in the Gospel of John. Jesus invited his disciples into friendship and sent them into the world to befriend others. Jesus modeled faithful friendship in his life and death, and his resurrection empowered his disciples to do the same. “As the disciples remained fixed on the resurrected Jesus, their Lord and Savior,” writes Roberts, “their faithfulness to one another deepened.”

Most of the book relates stories from the annals of 20th-century world missions that illustrate various aspects of faithful friendship in practice. We learn, for instance, about Indian national Savarirayan Jesudason and Scottish missionary Ernest Forrester-Paton, who together built an intentional Christian community that served the poor because they “saw their cross-cultural, transnational friendship as a deliberate Christian witness against colonialism and racism, and a statement of hope in building the kingdom of God.” We see the multinational legacy of friendship between American and Chinese Christians during the Cold War, which “illustrates how faithful friendship enlarges the meaning of family to an inclusive

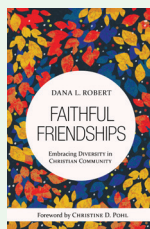
vision of the multiethnic family of Christ, joined together in life, death, and life beyond death.” And we encounter stories of friendships between people who should be political enemies in Zimbabwe, North Korea, and the Philippines—examples of how, “[e]specially in cross-cultural relationships, to live in mutuality as Christian friends means opening oneself to being misunderstood and criticized by both sides.”

In all these stories, Robert demonstrates how Christians have instinctively formed friendships with people unlike themselves because of their “desire to be faithful to Jesus’ message of love.” This has been true throughout history and in a variety of cultural and political contexts. In other words, forming costly cross-cultural relationships is more than a Christian imperative. It’s a uniquely Christian reflex.

Readers interested in missions, cross-cultural studies, and racial reconciliation can find many subtle lessons if they read between the lines. For instance, Robert’s accounts challenge the accepted narrative that Christian missions were always and everywhere a tool of cultural imperialism. Likewise, they illustrate how Christians with social and racial privilege can link their fortunes with those on the margins.

By design, *Faithful Friendships* offers few practical takeaways. Robert reminds us that friendship is not a strategy or a program. It is a Christian practice, not a means to an end.

A friend of mine who models “faithful friendship” in both her personal life and ministry recently observed, “We need more courage to take more risks of outrageous love for the sake of the gospel.” In an age that presses us to divide ourselves politically, geographically, ethnically, and otherwise, many of us need guidance in screwing up our courage. In its many helpful examples and exhortations, *Faithful Friendships* is just what the doctor ordered. **CT**



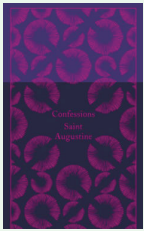
Faithful Friendships: Embracing Diversity in Christian Community
DANA L. ROBERT
Eerdmans

BRANDON J. O'BRIEN is director of content development and distribution for Redeemer City to City in Manhattan. His forthcoming book is *Not From Around Here: What Unites Us, What Divides Us, and How We Can Move Forward* (Moody).

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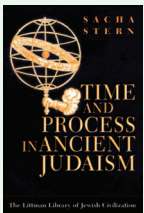
Top Five Books That Help Cultivate a Biblical View of Time

BY MICHAEL LEFEBVRE, author of *The Liturgy of Creation: Understanding Calendars in Old Testament Context* (IVP Academic).



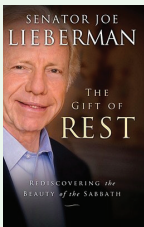
Confessions, Book XI AUGUSTINE

Before considering how we should view time, we ought to reflect on how God views time. Augustine's meditations show how attributes like "love" and "truth" are innate to God, but "temporality" is not. A boatload of theological controversies (like relating God's sovereignty to human free will) and practical conundrums (like praying in faith about the day while still tackling our responsibilities) find clarity as we frame our temporality in God's eternity.



Time and Process in Ancient Judaism SACHA STERN

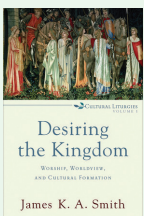
We are told to "save" time and "spend" it wisely. But "hours" and "days" are measurements, not entities with value in themselves. Stern explores a biblical view of time as the measurement of processes. This is an academic book and pretty heady stuff, but knowing what time is (and isn't) can help us focus on the value of living life wisely, not just scheduling it well.



The Gift of Rest: Rediscovering the Beauty of the Sabbath JOSEPH LIEBERMAN

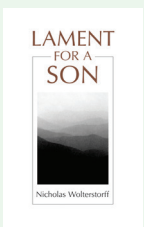
JOSEPH LIEBERMAN

From the Bible's first page, humankind is called to labor six days and Sabbath on the seventh. But the Sabbath has fallen on hard times. This "Sabbath memoir" draws readers into a fresh delight in "the gift of rest." Lieberman's Jewish observances may not translate directly for a Christian's experience. But the author's joy in the Sabbath, even while a US senator navigating the highest circles of political power, is an inspiration.



Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation JAMES K. A. SMITH

Israel's ancient calendars were innately religious, framing human work in divine worship. But modern society has trained us to treat our routines—daily chores, weekly shopping, annual taxes, school and work schedules—as secular arrangements for the service (some might say worship) of "productivity." *Desiring the Kingdom* helps Christians rediscover the importance of a sacred outlook on life's liturgies.



Lament for a Son NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF

Some books press us to maximize efficiency through better time management. Others urge us to slow down for a less stressful pace. Rather than idealizing (idolizing?) either speed or slowness, it seems prudent to let calling and contentment regulate our commitments. Suffering, of the sort Wolterstorff recounts in this memoir, often sharpens our focus on what's most important in life. His stinging lament in the face of death helps us gain perspective on redeeming the time God gives.