this sensitive and controversial area are cautious. Thus, on the issue of sex before marriage, we read that, given that this practice is widespread, the Church is asked to show ‘understanding and a sense of proportion’ (p. 148). There is no outright condemnation, but it is regretted. Sex within marriage is still considered normative for the Church. The author shows how over the years the position of the Methodist Church has changed in such deeply controversial areas such as human sexuality – not dramatically, but in subtle and nuanced ways.

When it comes to the Church, it is interesting to note Methodism’s uncertainty concerning its own existence. Sangster is quoted voicing this uncertainty in 1947, saying ‘The very fact that it was necessary to appoint a committee to restate the Message and Mission of Methodism makes it plain that others have sensed this uncertainty too’ (p. 259). This Anglican reviewer finds this so refreshing. So often the Church of England gives the impression that it has some divine right to exist, when that right belongs only to the great coming Church of ecumenical expectation. As a particular tradition within the Church, Methodism is seen to demonstrate a remarkable humility.

In a sense this book is a compendium of material. From ecology to gambling, from the Godhead to the human body, there is something here. Is there, however, a theme underlying it all? By the time I had come to the end of the book, it was Methodism’s stress on the generous grace of God which had impressed me. Perhaps this was to be expected, since John Wesley was an avowed Arminian, and the way the book is structured shows the continuing relevance of his thought for Methodists. So this book is eloquent testimony to a church with a deeply positive view of grace but which also believes it must wrestle with the impact of that grace as it is poured out in the present moment. ‘Grace that is received, must be responded to, through action for and with others for the sake of the Kingdom’ (p. 242). This is said by Shier-Jones with regard to the individual believer, but this book shows it is equally true for Methodists as a whole. British Methodism has gifts indeed to share on her reckoning.

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This book is essentially a review, and a review of a review is not the easiest thing to undertake. Three responses may be of use: (i) a description of the contents; (ii) a critique of the overall critical perspective; (iii) a note of observations relevant to readers of this journal.
(i) The work follows the tradition of surveys in *Theologische Rundschau*, covering scholarly literature of the twenty-five years up to 2000, though the English translation updates to 2002. Each chapter essentially wanders from one scholarly contribution to another, offering a brief summary of each book with often stringent criticism. I take the most substantial chapter as an example. Chapter 2 is entitled ‘Survey and Critique of Recent Conventional Reconstructions of Primitive Christianity’; it discusses some seven German, one French and nine English volumes, with reference to some others along the way. The organizing principle is not chronological, the sequence apparently growing organically out of approaches or topics. The focus is on assessment, and readers without German will not find the summaries a substitute way of accessing the literature reviewed. Of particular interest may be the remarks about Frend’s volume, *The Rise of Christianity*, Goulder’s work, *A Tale of Two Missions* and Burtchaell’s *From Synagogue to Church*.

The other chapters, all entitled ‘Survey and Critique’, cover the social history of primitive Christianity (ch. 3), recent studies of primitive Christianity from the perspective of Feminist Theology (ch. 4), recent studies of its environment (ch. 5), recent studies of primitive Christianity in the different centres of the Roman Empire (ch. 6) – i.e. Antioch, Rome, Macedonia, Ephesus and Asia Minor; and finally chapter 7 looks at recent studies of individual problems, covering a rather unexpected selection of books on a variety of topics. Two appendices discuss the problem of pre-Christian Gnosticism (Lüdemann’s conclusions tend to revert to the now old-fashioned position of the History of Religions School), and Gerd Theissen’s, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion*, while chapter 1 provides an overview on the task and method of description, especially the question of the demarcation of the period.

None of these chapters are as substantial as the second chapter. Social history is regarded as fashionable and as a potentially useful heuristic tool, but nevertheless in its infancy. Lüdemann prefers historico-critical attention to sources rather than deductive arguments inspired by sociological theory and arbitrarily applied to texts. In fact even Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, fails to let the texts speak and ‘social history proceeds at the expense of history’ (p. 75). The relative lightness of this chapter compared with the previous one means that a huge range of literature is simply not touched on. It is perhaps significant that feminist studies have any mention at all given their failure so far to take ‘root in the academic world’ ‘in Germany’ (p. 83), but this chapter too is lightweight and tends to be dismissive. Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, is given some searching treatment, however. More adequate is the discussion in the following chapter of books dealing with what we would once have called ‘background’, but then this serves Lüdemann’s essentially historical stance, as do the works surveyed next, which seek to trace the particular history of early Christianity in specific locations. Such studies often have the advantage of bringing together epigraphic and archaeological evidence to