
This is an author who certainly has the courage to display and reveal his position openly, from the very outset, and he continues to maintain it throughout the book, for the most part quoting only those who agree with him. Unlike much of the scholarly world, and indeed most of the ecumenical world, where one makes an attempt to see at least some good on the other side of whatever is the topic under discussion, and to establish some sort of dialectic and dialogue that can reach a new synthesis, taking into account both sides of the question, this book constitutes a rather thorough-going and one-sided indictment of the Roman Catholic Church on many counts, using clerical celibacy as the focus but also extending well beyond it. This is a book that finds virtually nothing good about ‘the heritage’ of clerical celibacy, and virtually everything related to it would best be deleted from the Roman Church as soon as possible. Early on the second page the author states his position, which he consistently maintains: ‘As a Protestant minister, I share the view of reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin – that compulsory celibacy should no longer be tolerated because it has corrupted Christian theology and practice.’ William Phipps is described on the back cover of this paperback as ‘Professor Emeritus of Religion and Philosophy’ at an institution called Davis and Elkins College in Elkins, West Virginia, and he has written numerous books on sexual themes. His doctoral dissertation, named in an early footnote, was on ‘The Attitude of the Apostle Paul toward Scripture’, accepted for a PhD from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland in 1956. His other books include * Recovering Biblical Sensuousness* (1975), * Influential Theologians on Wo/Man* (1980), * Genesis and Gender* (1989), * Assertive Biblical Women* (1992), * The Sexuality of Jesus* (1996), as well as various articles. Overall, the book’s perspective seemed to this reviewer as being American, liberal, protestant, Presbyterian, and anti-catholic. Celibacy, in the author’s view, is a systemic disease, of which the many instances of sexual abuse, both known and unknown, are but the surface symptoms (p. 3). The nine chapters of the book are arranged historically, beginning with ‘The Pre-Christian Era’. The next chapter, entitled ‘A Celibate Jesus?’, disputing the view of Pope John Paul II and many others that Jesus was a true celibate, but also disagreeing with the views of Hugh Montefiore, John Boswell, and Morton Smith that Jesus was gay, concludes that Jesus was probably a heterosexual and that he probably married. In the process, Phipps also takes issue with the views of Max Thurian, William Countryman, Reginald Fuller, Dominic Crossan, E.P.
Sanders, Lewis Smedes, Gerard Sloyan, Harvey Cox, Sherwin Bailey, and Maurice Wiles, among others. Paul’s apparent advocacy of celibacy is attributed to a pre-critical [mis]understanding of the end of history, a ‘misuse of biblical literature’ that ‘continues to be presented by the Catholic magisterium’ in spite of critical biblical scholarship (pp. 65, 71). By contrast, and without reference here to modern feminist critiques or the increasing practice of women’s ordination, and using only masculine reference, Phipps urges that ‘a candidate for church office must show ability to govern his children, on the relevant assumption that the way a father relates to his family displays his talent for pastoral oversight of a church community’ (p. 73). He also scolds Catholicism for treating bishops as successors of the apostles, ‘even though bishops in the New Testament were not witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection’. ‘Some Protestants,’ he remarks, citing William Tyndale with obvious approval, ‘have [even] made marriage compulsory for ministers’, whereas it is only ‘in a convoluted manner’ [that] ‘Catholicism has attempted to find precedents for its celibate priests’ (pp. 74-75).

Moving right on through history, the author presents his view that it was the writers of the patristic era who transformed Paul’s view of celibacy, earlier expressed in eschatological context as a temporary expedient, into something assumed to have a permanent and intrinsic moral worth that was increasingly associated with the restriction of eucharistic presidency to unmarried priests who were ritually pure. Phipps sees the council of Elvira in the early fourth century as a major turning point in this move to ‘establish a clerical elite’, as the Spanish church ‘sought leadership control’. Elvira’s attempted prohibition of marital sexuality for clergy he describes as a ‘radical deviation from the Judeo-Christian religion’, and the attempt by Pope Siricius in the later fourth century to make it authoritative for the entire western church he sees as ‘the first directive by a Roman bishop to an area outside his jurisdiction’ (p. 95). All this soon became enmeshed with the ascetic movements and monasticism of the fourth and fifth centuries in the persons and teaching of Anthony, Jerome, and Augustine, and a trajectory was thus clearly established. In comments that link unfavourably The Jerome Biblical Commentary with the scripture scholar for whom it is named, Jerome himself is dismissed as ‘far from establishing sound principles for biblical interpretation,’ but rather as the purveyor of ‘perverse treatments’ and manipulation of the text (pp. 106-107).

The chapter on ‘The Medieval Era’ is peppered with comments and tales that could have been stated more graciously, or not at all. After reading of ‘the audacious claim of the pope in Rome to be the authoritative Vicar of Christ over the whole church’, we next come upon the cutesy statements that ‘In living