



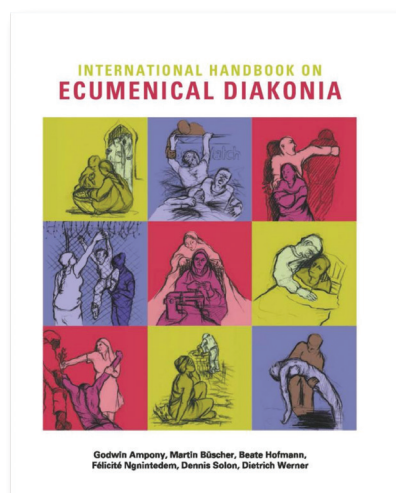
Book Reviews

October 2023

Section Editors: Craig L. Nesson, Troy M. Troftgruben

Review a book!

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International Handbook of Ecumenical Diakonia: Contextual Theologies and Practices of Diakonia and Christian Social Services—Resources for Study and Intercultural Learning.

Edited by Godwin Ampony, Martin Büscher, Beate Hofmann, Félicité Ngnintedem, Dennis Solon, and Dietrich Werner.

Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-9133-6391-8. Cloth. xviii and 713 pages. \$59.

This is the definitive reference volume of this generation on the burgeoning field of diaconal studies across the globe. It serves as a reference work for scholars and a text for students of diakonia. The 104 entries are organized into four major parts: 1) Theologies of Diakonia in Different Ecclesial and Social Contexts, 2) Concepts and Profiles of Diaconal Ministries in Different World Regions, 3) Trends and Crucial Concerns in Diakonia, and 4) Models and Methods for Competency Building in Diakonia.

The introductory essays locate the publication within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which summoned forth urgent diaconal responses, and commentary on the “works of mercy” from Matthew 25 as depicted on the book cover. The nine forms of mercy provide a biblical grounding for understanding God’s calling the church to diakonia over the centuries.

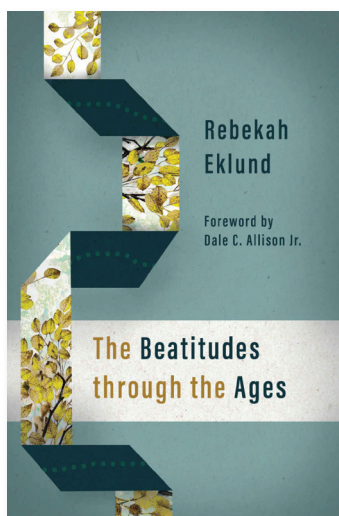
Foundational articles include “Terminologies, Learning Processes and Recent Developments in Ecumenical Diakonia” by Dietrich Werner and Matthew Ross, “Diakonia in

Trinitarian Perspective and as Dimension of the *Missio Dei* by Kjell Nordstokke, “Towards a Comprehensive Concept of Diakonia: Care, Transformation, Empowerment, Advocacy, and Conviviality” by Wanda Deifelt and Beate Hofmann, and “Interpretation, Inspiration and Interruption: The Role of Theologies in Diakonia” by Sturla J. Ståksett. Many of the essays demonstrate the understandings and practices of diakonia in diverse geographical regions and specific countries across six continents. Several articles take close looks at the work of diakonia in different denominations and church bodies. The book establishes the contextual character of embodied diakonia to address regional and local challenges.

The discourse of the World Council of Churches generated in the process leading to the publication of *Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diakonia* (2022) <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/ecumenical-diakonia> is evident in the organization of the book by the editors and informs the contributions of many authors. The influence of The Lutheran World Federation’s theme of “prophetic diakonia” as developed in *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment* (2009) <https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DMD-Diakonia-EN-low.pdf> undergirds the shift toward advocacy and social change as the outcomes of diaconal work. This is especially evident in the themes of human dignity, peacebuilding, sustainability, displacement, poverty reduction, social exclusion, migration, and social responsibility that recur in part 3. One fresh topic highlights conviviality as a diaconal good.

The focus in part 4 on diaconal training and capacity building displays the varied forms and levels of development of diakonia in different global contexts. The historic expressions of diakonia in Germany and Scandinavia provide a point of departure that are discovering integral manifestations in numerous global contexts. While in North America there are many diaconal traditions that have long contributed to the common good, the time has come for the consolidation of a field of diaconal studies to contribute to critical reflection and ground practice. This book provides both a model and substance for that undertaking. Highly recommended for renewing the church’s imagination for mission as diakonia in this post-Christendom age.

Craig L. Nesson
Wartburg Theological Seminary



***The Beatitudes
through the Ages.***
By Rebekah Eklund.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021.
ISBN: 978-0-8028-7650-8. Cloth.
368 pages. \$35.00.

This is a massive work of scholarship, fascinating and well written, covering nearly two thousand years of commentaries on the Beatitudes of Jesus as we know them from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and

the Sermon on the Plain in Luke. The author is a professor of theology at Loyola University in Baltimore where she teaches Scripture, theology, and ethics.

Eklund explains in the Introduction that this is a work that is called *Wirkungsgeschichte* in Germany, which is sometimes translated “reception history,” but more precisely means “the history of a text’s effects.” She observes that this includes paying attention to “how a text has interpreted us, its readers” (3-4). The method involves the author exegeting and interpreting each of the beatitudes in separate chapters, cannily beginning each with a brief, engaging story that situates the particular beatitude in a human context that helps illuminate its significance.

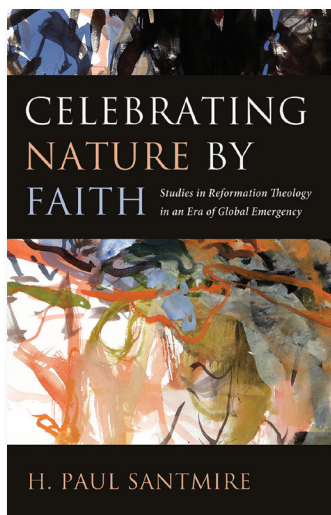
Rather than probe for a single meaning for each beatitude, the author takes great care in uncovering the manifold layers of meaning each of Jesus’ sayings has had over the centuries. This is accomplished chiefly by citing commentaries and sermons from a wide variety of Christians reflecting on these well-known texts. A partial list would include Tertullian and Origen, Ambrose and Augustine, Jerome and Gregory of Nyssa, Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, Wesley and Edwards, Bonhoeffer and Barth, as well as more recent figures such as Billy Graham, Clarence Jordan, Ron Sider, Gustavo Gutiérrez and a smattering of popes.

Women commentators are in a slim minority over the ages, although the author has worked hard to cite a few, mainly from more recent times. She also takes care to include contrasting viewpoints and to locate minority perspectives in their historical contexts. One is left almost breathless in considering the scope of references consulted by the author and the deftness with which she has woven together so much material from such diverse sources to tell a consistent, organized, and digestible story. The footnotes are ample, and a forty-five-page bibliography is included.

Eklund’s labor of love fully validates her effort to demonstrate the value of these insights for those who seek to interpret the beatitudes. Our perspectives can be greatly informed by Christians of earlier ages and their different experiences of the

church and the world. The author indulges in a bit of confession in the Conclusion: “I didn’t expect to be changed by writing a book on the Beatitudes, but I was ... The more you wrestle with the Beatitudes, the more they pull you into their depth. The deeper you dig, the more they yield” (290).

John Rollefson
Retired ELCA pastor
San Luis Obispo, California



***Celebrating Nature
by Faith: Studies in
Reformation Theology
in an Era of Global
Emergency.***

By H. Paul Santmire.

Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books,
2020. ISBN: 978-1-5326-9971-9.
Paper. xvii and 175 pages. \$27.00.

H. Paul Santmire is a drum major for eco-justice. This book is a testament to the length, breadth, and depth of his commit-

ment to a “theology of nature” that takes with profound seriousness the inheritance of Reformation theology in a Lutheran key. The text serves as an *apologia pro vita sua* devoted to tracing the course of the flourishing field of ecological theology that emerged and has taken shape in his lifetime, and to which Santmire has made major contributions.

The book is organized into five chapters that discuss the main reference points for his formulation of a theology of nature. The first chapter explores biblical foundations, stressing the value of shifting the hermeneutical paradigm from stewardship to partnership with nature: “That God has a partnership *with nature* and humans *with nature* likewise and *all creatures of nature are partners with each other*, are themes that may well need to be introduced to our Churches and to at least a few of our preachers and teachers” (40).

Chapter 2 is devoted to Luther’s theology of nature. Santmire develops an argument for complementing Luther’s theology of hearing the Word with a theology of seeing “the paradoxical imminence of God in the visible creation” (53): “... the theme of *finitum capax infinitum* and the corresponding view of the visible creation as omni-miraculous, full of wonder and enchantment, is undergirded by Luther’s theology of the creative Word of God...” (59). Santmire is at his most generative when reinterpreting Christology in relation to the presence of God in the world, reclaiming the significance of the cosmic Christ.

Chapter 3 is a tribute to the seminal work of Joseph Sittler, who already in the 1950s challenged the prevailing existentialist theology to open itself to the world of nature. Santmire recounts



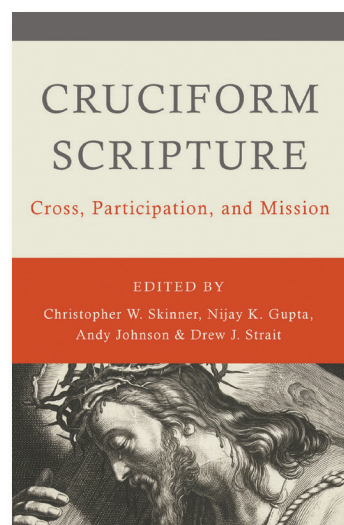
major moments in the development of Sittler's "Christology of nature," including his 1954 essay on "A Theology for the Earth," his landmark 1961 address to the World Council of Churches Assembly at New Delhi, and his other published work. A central theme involves Sittler's "sensitivity of seeing" for "transfiguring nature."

Chapter 4 takes up the growing focus on the theology of nature in subsequent decades. Major figures in the Lutheran tradition include Philip Hefner, Ted Peters, Terence Fretheim, David Rhoads, Gordon Lathrop, and Larry Rasmussen, each reviewed for the contributions from their respective disciplines. That this focus also has taken root in the social teaching documents and liturgical materials of the church marks the advent of ecological theology among Lutherans.

Chapter 5 offers a first-person narrative by the author of his journey as an ecological theologian. Santmire early on discovered a passion for ecology and justice, themes core to his construal of a theology of nature. This is a fascinating account of his own theological education and career in this age of global emergency, whereas previously attention to creation and nature had been largely muted. The author traces the logic of his theological writings over the course of more than five decades. My awareness and appreciation for the legacy of Santmire was strengthened by reading his account. Those who write the history of theology for this era will do well to honor this journey.

Craig L. Nesson

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Cruciform Scripture: Cross, Participation, and Mission. Edited by Christopher W. Skinner, Nijay K. Gupta, Andy Johnson, and Drew J. Strait.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021.
ISBN: 978-0-8028-7637-9. 318 pages. Paper. \$35.00.

This is a Festschrift of scholarly essays solicited from colleagues, former students, and admirers of

the New Testament theologian Michael Gorman, who has spent nearly his entire career as a professor and dean at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore. This collection consists of fifteen substantial essays on various NT books that focus on the theme of "cruciformity," which Gorman brought to prominence twenty years ago with *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (2001). The chapters illuminate many facets of NT study as well as topics that Gorman has explored in subsequent publications, including "participation" and "mission."

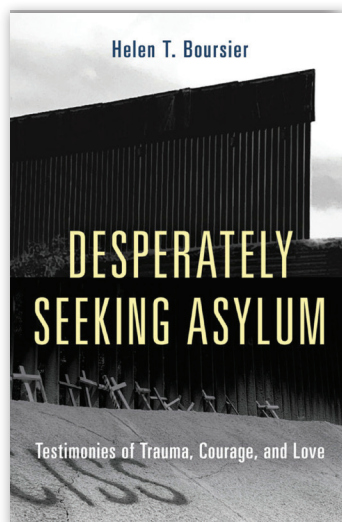
Essays by Rebekah Eklund and Richard B. Hays on cruciformity's role in shaping discipleship in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, respectively, are noteworthy. I was especially impressed by two chapters that addressed intriguingly the Roman imperial context in which the early Christian community took root. The first by Drew J. Strait, titled "An Alternative Global Imaginary: Imperial Rome's Pax Romana and Luke's 'Counter-Violent' *Missio Dei*," focuses on the Acts account of Peter's visit to the Roman centurion Cornelius. Strait suggests that Luke's story, often taken to imply a flattering take on the Roman imperium, might rather be seen as a clever, irony-laced tale that could elude Roman censors on the lookout for imperial critics (198 ff.).

Also of note is the essay by Sylvia C. Keesmaat titled "Citizenship and Empire: A Missional Engagement with Ephesians" (which the author posits is a genuine Pauline letter). She contends that Ephesians is a rich mine of evidence on early Christian thinking about their own peoplehood, including what it meant to be a citizen of Christ's kingdom prior to any claim Rome may have held over a person, whether slave or free. Keesmaat points out how *ta ethne*, (most often translated as "gentiles" and assumed to mean "non-Jews") was a construct "that came to be overwhelmingly shaped by Rome. . . to mean those who were non-Roman" (242). The author makes effective use of ancient numismatics, imperial religious iconography, and other cultural artifacts in deepening our understanding of how Christians saw themselves as the people of God in the midst of imperial challenges to their cruciform identities.

This book is a model for honoring a revered scholar and mentor with a collection of thematically arranged essays that reflect and expand upon the honoree's original scholarly contribution. The brief Introduction by two former students and an Epilogue by Gorman's three children (all of whom studied with their father) offer personal testimonials to a scholar known as an outstanding teacher, community member, and ecumenically minded churchman.

John Rollefson

Retired ELCA Pastor



Desperately Seeking Asylum: Testimonies of Trauma, Courage, and Love.

By Helen T. Boursier.

London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. ISBN: 978-1-5381-2833-6. 226 pages. Cloth. \$40.00.

In this work, Boursier, a theologian and pastor, seeks to inform and persuade Americans to open their eyes to the realities of asylum seekers in the current political climate.

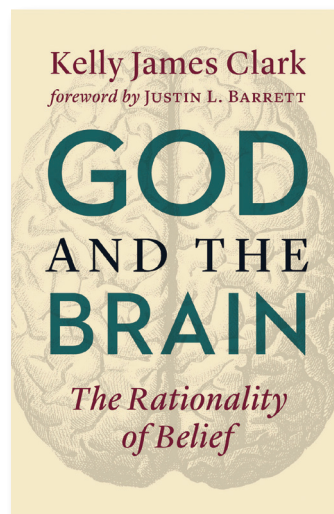
The first part of the book gives voice to the asylum seekers, sharing their own words through poetry, narratives, and striking descriptions of their terrifying journeys and harrowing experiences in the United States, as well as the reasons many made the necessary choice to flee their homelands. The second part discusses the complex immigration policies and practices that condition the deplorable conditions asylum seekers face upon arrival and how the administration contradicts their own policies in its unlawful treatment of them. The final section offers proposals for practical actions that concerned citizens can take, as well as expressing hope for more honorable policies and processes to dignify their suffering.

For the pastor, this book gives a compelling account of firsthand experiences. It brings a depth of understanding to the current crisis by an author, who is a pastor herself, and others who work in the field. Samples of journal entries and poetry from asylum seekers give their stories clarity and visibility to make them come alive. The author assists pastors and laypeople to understand the mentality of those fleeing their homes. For example, the difficult decision of a Guatemalan family to send their children to America is compared to a European family sending their children to the countryside during the rise of Nazi Germany. These examples, along with vivid explanations of border crossing experiences, will help pastors to grasp key issues and understand why many are advocating for the rights of asylum seekers. For a church community that seeks to be an advocate, the third part of the book gives concrete routes toward activism that can guide decisions and thoughtful engagement.

Most compelling is the call for faith leaders to stand up to injustice and practice radical hospitality. While the author describes the abhorrent government policies and practices, discussion on why certain policies may be in place for good reasons or possible noble intentions are largely omitted. This book is recommended for those who seek a more in-depth analysis, especially to understand critics of United States policy and why many are demanding a complete revision of current immigration policies. Routes to stopping unlawful child detention are offered,

for example, letters to senators, methods of nonviolent protests, and interfaith charitable work. Footnotes, detailed citations, and resources for further education and action provide the reader with confidence that the lived experiences of asylum seekers demand attention and action. This text is both gut-wrenching in its narratives and heavy with law and policy explanations. The book can serve as a good resource to raise awareness of social challenges in our context.

Jennifer LaChonce
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God and the Brain: The Rationality of Belief.

By Kelly James Clark.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019. ISBN: 978-8028-7691-1. Paper. 231 pages. \$25.99.

This is a useful book, written by a philosopher of religion, that brings the reader up to speed on two related areas: “the cognitive science of religion,” which is “in its infancy,” and

“the evolutionary psychology of religion,” which, he claims, “is even younger” (42). The author’s goal is not merely to update the reader on what recent advances in neuroscience might contribute to our knowledge of human religiosity. Clark focuses from the start on contending with those who claim that religion is a product of human irrationality traceable to (mis)functioning brain activity.

The late and widely published atheist, Richard Dawkins, is Clark’s oft-cited exemplar of this viewpoint, whom he delights in countering. The author demonstrates how all forms of human knowing can be shown to be belief-based, for example, in such widespread human activities as “Theory of Mind” shortcuts to decision making (more simply known as “mindreading”) or “agency detecting devices,” which help move us to action. There is no room here to explain these sophisticated but common cognitive “moves” our brains employ. Clark’s point is that even scientific “inferential” thinking relies heavily on such belief-related processes used by our minds. Further, he argues that this is a form of thinking that demonstrates how belief can be “rational.”

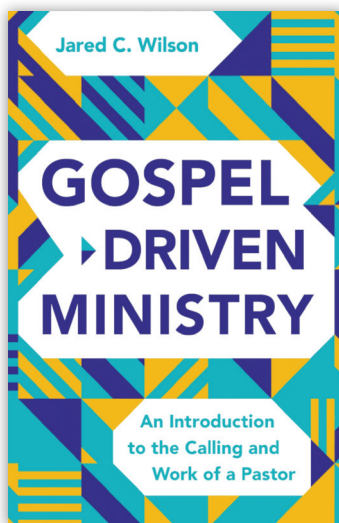
Clark claims the Reformed epistemology of noted contemporary philosophers Nicholas Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga in their interpretation of eighteenth-century Scottish “Common Sense” philosopher Thomas Reid (73 ff.) as formative



for his sense of rationality. This tradition posits the existence of a “God–faculty” (*sensus divinus*) that all humans have innately, what some have mislabeled a “God gene.” Interestingly, Clark counters the claim by contemporary atheists of their superior intellectual capability (based on IQ) than that of religious believers due to the likelihood of “conformity bias.” Moreover, he suggests—in what smacks of an unseemly *tête-à-tête*—that atheists as a group are more likely to be higher on the autistic spectrum than believers, making it cognitively more difficult for them to believe in a personal god and participate in group ritual activity!

The concluding chapter moves beyond such polemics to a genuine effort to promote “intellectual humility” between believers and non-believers. The concluding sentence urges: “As we reflect on the rationality of belief and unbelief, a little humor, a lot of charity, and even more humility seem called for” (175). Better late than never!

John Rollefson
Retired ELCA Pastor



Gospel-Driven Ministry: An Introduction to the Calling and Work of a Pastor.

By Jared Wilson.

Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021.
ISBN: 978-0-310-1156-6. Cloth.
234 pages. \$22.99.

Titles tell a lot. I must confess that to find “gospel” and “driven” in the same sentence, much less hyphenated as an adjective

preceding “ministry,” is off-putting. I understand the gospel as a persuasive, underwhelming, gently winning promise of good news in Jesus Christ, rather than a coercive, overwhelming force that “drives” certain actions and loyalties. That the lead endorser of the book is the President of the Southern Baptist Convention testifies to the deeply conservative evangelical orientation of this book, the sequel to a similarly named effort titled *The Gospel-Driven Church*.

Early on Wilson clarifies his aim to address “qualified Christian men who are called by God and commissioned by others” (12), detailing his case for why the pastorate is restricted to men according to his understanding of the Bible and the teaching of the church. It prompts a peculiar sensation, fifty years after ELCA Lutherans began to welcome female pastors into our ranks, to encounter exclusively male arguments for the pastoral role. This recognition leads me to grieve the lack of female pastoral perspective available to conservative evangelicalism.

The book itself is a well-intended and biblically referenced (if not critically exegeted) work to bring new pastors to a deeper understanding of who they are called to be. The book is clearly written with each of the ten chapters including questions “For Reflection” and “For Further Study.” The five-page bibliography consists entirely of works from conservative evangelical publishers without a single mainline church or university publishing house cited. Footnotes rarely cite individuals or events from the history of the church, although Martin Luther is quoted to good effect several times to make salient theological points.

Wilson displays disinclination to endorse fundamentalism and legalism as he understands them. He scorns the prosperity gospel and the “self-orientation” (94) which has laid the groundwork for the evangelical movement’s slowness to face up to its own epidemic of child abuse scandals and other pastoral abuses.

This work is unlikely to have a long shelf-life, useful mainly to mark what conservative evangelicals thought important about pastors in the first quarter of twenty-first century America—and what they ignored. For mainliners, the book might help them to understand the perspectives of the Baptist pastor down the street a little better!

John Rollefson
Retired ELCA Pastor



The Invitation: A Theology of Evangelism.

By Richard R. Osmer.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021.
ISBN: 978-0-8028-7622-5. xi and
270 pages. Paper. \$24.99.

Richard R. Osmer embraces a topic that many of us remain hesitant to touch, myself included. This is a book that breaks down our understanding of evangelism to rebuild it,

using the name evangelization to help signal the shift away from an emphasis on conversion or human decisions. Osmer grounds his understanding of evangelization in trinitarian theology, drawing on the works of Karl Barth and biblical writers to return us to an understanding of evangelization that acknowledges God’s deep love for us, not what we have to do to earn that love. This book is a good introduction to the world of evangelism for those who want to explore the topic further but are intimidated by it.

In denominations that shy away from talking about evangelism, this work helps us look at how evangelism is commonly understood and pushes us to imagine what evangelization can look like in our daily lives. It moves readers beyond the all-or-

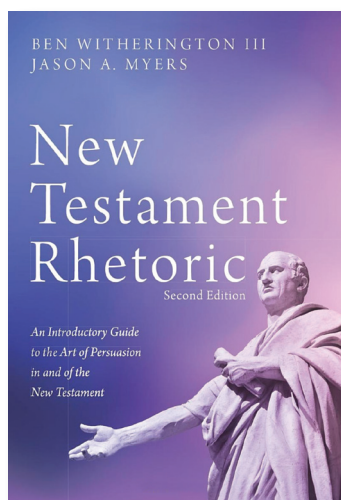


nothing approaches to focus on a relational and community-oriented approach. While these are things we might understand cognitively, the church can make this a part of our lived reality. Ultimately, evangelism is not about numbers, “souls saved,” or what we do as humans. It is about how we are invited into and transformed by what God has already done and continues to do in the world.

The book includes case studies throughout, as well as guides for how people can write their own evangelism case studies. This is particularly helpful for use in congregational settings, working with evangelism teams or others interested, because it requires intentional study of the theology of evangelism. So much of our thinking around evangelism comes from the voices that are theologically embedded in us, which we do not take time to unpack and study further. I can imagine several uses for this in my congregation, especially a small group study of the book.

The conversations with Barth’s writings were particularly helpful because often his writings are dismissed or misunderstood because of their difficulty. The emphasis on biblical writing returns readers to an understanding of evangelization that begins with the early disciples, rather than more recent focus on revivals, altar calls, and fear-based tactics. The book is a wake-up call for what congregations can be doing beyond the noise around us, especially when we have used the louder voices as an excuse not to talk about evangelism. While the entire book is full of useful reflections about evangelism, the last two pages provide succinct and helpful guidelines to move the church forward with a revived emphasis on evangelization.

Sara Funkhouser, Pastor
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New Testament Rhetoric: An Introductory Guide to the Art of Persuasion in and of the New Testament. Second edition. By Ben Witherington III and Jason A. Myers.

Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2022.
ISBN 978-1-5326-8968-0. xiii and 380 pages. Paper. \$45.00.

This second edition of the introductory guide by Ben Witherington III, who serves as Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary, now includes his former student, Jason A. Myers, who teaches biblical studies at Greensboro College. Several updates have been

made in this second edition: (1) some of the original chapters have been revised and augmented; (2) entirely new material on ancient education, the progymnasmata, and the rhetoric of Revelation has been added by Witherington; and (3) a fulsome chapter on 1 Corinthians and Romans and a chapter on the Captivity Epistles have been added by Myers. The purpose of the book is unchanged from the first edition: to provide the reader with an entrance into understanding Greco-Roman rhetoric of various parts of the New Testament (xi).

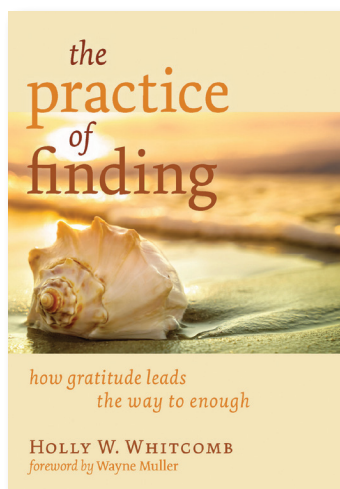
The book begins with “Oral Cultures of the Biblical World” and the “History and Practice of Ancient Rhetoric,” followed by chapters on Mark, Luke, Acts, a selection of letters in the Pauline corpus, most of the “Catholic Epistles” including Hebrews, and Revelation. The book closes with a “Post Script” on the rhetoric of preaching, two appendixes on elementary exercises and an apologetic for the importance of rhetoric for NT study, followed by an annotated bibliography and listing of works cited.

The book makes a strong case, especially through the introductory chapters and the appendixes, for the value of Greco-Roman rhetorical analysis of the New Testament (following the approach of George A. Kennedy). Many of the rhetorical outlines, however, are “bare bones” prompting the reader to go back to the text to clarify what the authors meant. Not all NT writings are discussed. For example, I looked in vain for rhetorical outlines of the Thessalonian correspondence. Contrary to the view of Hans Dieter Betz that Galatians contains apologetic rhetoric, the authors argue for its deliberative function. The rhetorical device of prosopopoeia or “impersonation” gets an extended treatment using it to address the question of the speaker’s identity in Romans 7.

“Questions for Reflection” after each chapter are a helpful guide for classroom assignments. Of interest in the annotated bibliography is the review of Vernon Robbins distinguishing his approach from Witherington and Myers (321–322, 368–369), and also the *Blackwell Companion to the NT* that features the rhetorical approaches of Duane Watson and Robbins, plus a survey of the origins and development of NT rhetorical criticism by Troy Martin.

Although this book is a helpful resource, I wish the authors would have included a glossary of rhetorical terms and a Scripture or subject index.

Charles B. Puskas
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The Practice of Finding: How Gratitude Leads the Way to Enough. By Holly W. Whitcomb.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019.
ISBN: 978-0-8028-7530-3. Paper.
180 pages. \$19.99.

The author, a United Church of Christ pastor, spiritual director, and retreat leader, joins a growing phalanx of those who are

giving attention to gratitude as a virtue worth cultivating in our dog-eat-dog world. The book raises awareness to help people become mindful of the manifold reasons for giving gratitude a major role in our inner lives. Whitcomb's special take contrasts what she calls "the practice of finding," a present-minded discovery orientation, to the future-oriented "seeker" mentality prevalent in church and spirituality circles where the emphasis is on "striving" rather than "being" (4).

Although the point is a good one, the question can be raised whether it merits an entire book. The text is brimming with quotations from other authors, mainly from similar books in the self-help spirituality genre. Curiously, there are only a handful of scripture texts cited and those are not explored in depth regarding a topic that is richly biblical in origin and rooted in a theology of grace.

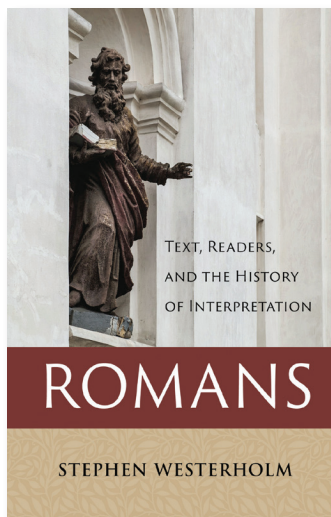
This book recalls an experience I had fifteen years ago that summarizes the book's message. On a sabbatical trip, my wife and I were taking a walk in the German city of Weimar. When we rounded a corner, our eyes were drawn to some decorous graffiti painted on the upper story of a building: "Die Welt ist voll alltäglicher Wunder," which means "The world is full of everyday miracles." Even more amazing was that the quotation was attributed to Martin Luther, whose Wittenberg we had visited the previous day. I immediately adopted this newly discovered

saying of Luther as the theme of my sabbatical and indeed as my all-time favorite theological insight from Brother Martin.

All that needs to be said about gratitude as a virtue is that we need to be surprised always and at every moment by the wonders God has in store for us if we only have the eyes of faith to behold them! Although "Learning to Savor and Finding Wonder" is the title of Whitcomb's first chapter, I think she pays insufficient attention to the overwhelmingly gratuitous and serendipitous wellspring of God's surprising graciousness out of which genuine gratitude springs.

The author helpfully provides at the conclusion of each chapter discussion questions suitable for small groups and "Practices and Ponderings," which suggest spiritual practices. There is also a thirteen-page Leader's Guide outlining a retreat agenda together with selected bibliography.

John Rollefson
Retired ELCA Pastor



Romans: Text, Readers, and the History of Interpretation. By Stephen Westerholm.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022.
ISBN: 978-0-8028-8221-9. xi &
418 pages. Cloth. \$49.99.

As the subtitle indicates, this book develops three foci. To begin, Westerholm examines the manuscript evidence for Romans. Along with discussing the usual major textual issues, Wester-

holm explores two interesting claims. First, manuscript variations provide a window into the early history of interpreting Romans. Second, "For nearly 1,500 years, readers of the Greek text encountered it exclusively in handwritten copies that differed from each other. Almost nobody cared" (39). The church's experience of the text as God's Word was not and is not bound to a single wording. One result of this conviction is the church's early practice of translating the Bible into other languages.

The second section examines the identity of the first hearers (and thus first interpreters) of Romans. Westerholm briefly describes the believing communities in Rome in the mid-first century. Then he discusses and critiques the recent "Radical New Perspective." This approach is characterized by claims that Paul addressed Romans exclusively to Gentile believers, that Paul remained a Jew who observed the ritual aspects of the law and expected other Jewish members of the church to do likewise, and that Paul claimed faith in Christ as the way for Gentiles alone to become righteous. Westerholm finds some elements here to affirm. Paul did not change "religions" and did not repudiate

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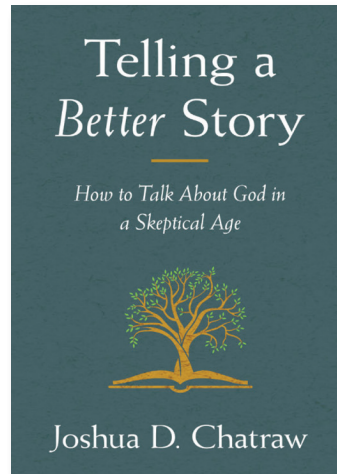


Judaism as either legalistic or ethnocentric. However, contrary to the claims of the Radical New Perspective, Paul presents himself as a Jew who longs for the righteousness found through faith in Christ. Paul asserts bondage to sin apart from Christ and freedom in Christ for both Jews and Gentiles alike. For Westerholm, the “Radical New Perspective” domesticates Paul by confining Paul’s thoughts within the range of other Second Temple Jewish voices.

The third (and by far the largest) section reviews the history of interpreting Romans. This provides a gallery of influential interpreters of Romans across the centuries: Patristic (Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine), Medieval (Abelard, Aquinas), Sixteenth Century (Erasmus, Luther, Melancthon, Calvin), and Modern (from Spenser to Barth). Westerholm pays attention to how these various interpreters handled several perennial interpretive issues, including how Adam’s disobedience is related to humanity’s sinful condition, the identity of the “I” in Romans 7, the doctrine of predestination, and the relationship of justification through faith on the one hand to a life of obedience on the other. There are enough quotes to give the reader a sense of each interpreter’s voice without those quotes becoming ponderous. Westerholm is clear, concise, and gracious throughout this review of interpreters.

This book is not a commentary. But as a prelude to Westerholm’s forthcoming Romans commentary, it is a probing look at how Romans has been read differently throughout history. This is a helpful resource for all who study, teach, and preach Romans today. It provides historical and theological perspective on the issues raised in any careful reading of Romans. It also provides perspective on one’s own theology, its historical as well as biblical roots, and a generous and humble understanding of why others have arrived at different conclusions.

Brian Peterson
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***Telling a Better Story:
How to Talk About
God in a Skeptical Age.***
By Joshua D. Chatraw.

Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020.
ISBN: 978-0-3101-0863-4. 222
pages. Paper. \$18.99.

Books with flashy titles seldom satisfy. And this is no exception. The author starts promisingly by sketching the peculiar difficulties the church faces in our post-

modern age. We need to be proclaiming the Gospel as a story that connects with people along the trajectories of the largely secular stories they inhabit. It seems like good advice that we must listen deeply to others’ stories to become savvy apologists for the gospel narrative’s saving message.

Among the author’s favorite interlocutors are Dostoyevsky (especially Ivan Karamazov in “The Grand Inquisitor”), philosopher Charles Taylor, literary figures and writers C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkein, and St. Augustine of Hippo. Among the evangelical scholars referenced are N.T. Wright, Alister McGrath, Timothy Keller, and other practitioners of apologetics.

It is the author’s overall apologetic purpose in aiming to tell a “better story” that gives his well-meaning and contemporary effort a nonetheless defensive and inauthentic feel. The concluding chapters—which suggest ways to counter the charges brought by various contemporary skeptics that the Gospel is an “oppressive,” “unloving,” and “untrue” metanarrative—strike this reader as improved public relations and evangelical defensiveness masquerading as postmodern apologetics.

Nowhere in the chapter on the “truth” of the story is there effort to address the elephant in the room: how truth is viewed by much of conservative evangelicalism as wedded to a political movement that disdains truth-telling, becoming instead a pious “truthiness,” as Stephen Colbert has satirized it.

Contributing to my dissatisfaction with Chatraw’s fresh effort at updating Christian apologetics is his own failure to convince by referencing the Bible’s own storytelling genius. Jesus was a master in his imaginative use of parables and scripture, and his whole way of being with people. Jesus seems the opposite of the clever salesperson version this book appears to be touting, the one about whom people need to make the right “choice” or “decision” to become a part of the Gospel story (223).

John Rollefson
Retired ELCA Pastor



Testament.

By Micheal O'Siadhail.

Waco: Baylor University Press,
2022. ISBN: 978-1-4813-1628-6.
xi and 218 pages. Cloth. \$24.99.

Micheal O'Siadhail is one of the foremost poets of our times writing in the English language. Born in 1947 at Dublin, he has an extensive body of poetic work, for which he has been internationally recognized, having taught at Trinity College Dublin, Harvard University, and Yale University, among other appointments. I have been a devoted reader of O'Siadhail poems for many years, including the *Collected Poems* (2014) and *The Five Quintets* (2018). *The Gossamer Wall* (2002) profoundly recalls the Holocaust with evocative images and remembrances of the Catastrophe. O'Siadhail employs a variety of classic and contemporary forms and is conversant with theology. His work has always impressed me as profoundly spiritual.

In this new volume, *Testament*, O'Siadhail combines two major poem cycles. The first consists of 150 poems in his "Psalter" and the second, "Gospel," 50 poems based on the gospel narratives, each poem taking up a different Jesus story. This Psalter offers the perspective of a singular poet, who brings the experiences of a lifetime amid the world's challenges to bear on his relationship with God. These poems evoke wonder, awe, perplexity, questioning, and praise. Because they are the composition of one author, the reader has the privilege to introspect the soul through his lens.

From "128" of the "Psalter" (134-135):

My years begin to mount and I
Now no longer try
To counter you.
Let things just happen as I do
Your will.
Perhaps some dreams I won't fulfill.

Ambitions I may not achieve,
Work that I will leave
Undone. All time
Is yours and in your kingdom I'm
At ease
With whatsoever may still please.

I'm freer than I've ever been,
Wild and yet serene;
Come day, go day,
See how I dare in work or play
Let go.
I'm trusting you who are the flow.

The reader does well to read meditatively and slowly, dwelling in the poetic ambiance. These are well suited for devotional reading and praying.

The "Gospel" orders poems according to the narrative of Jesus' life. They include subjects from the annunciation to the calling of the twelve, encounters with characters and parables, to the passion and resurrection stories. From "A Samaritan" (179):

He pays the keeper saying as he leaves,
'Take care of him and then on my return
I will repay whatever more you spend'.
'Who's neighbor to the victim of the thieves?'
Asks Jesus of the lawyer now in turn.
'The one who shows him mercy', he replies.
Then Jesus brings this testing to an end—
'Go do likewise!'

And from "Foot Washing" (205):

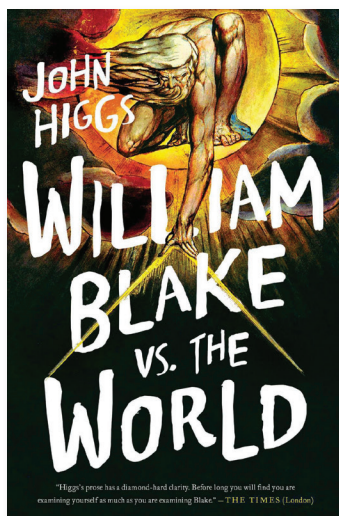
'Now do for each other fully in accord
With what I have done in love for you, my friends;
My example is love for you made manifest.

'The servant is not greater than his lord,
The sent is not greater than the one who sends.
If knowing these things you do them you are blessed'.

I can imagine employing material from poems on the passion to enhance materials and services during Lent and Holy Week.

Writing about poetry you love is not as impactful as the reading itself. For those with the time to sit and dwell, this book is highly recommended.

Craig L. Nesson
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William Blake vs. the World. By John Higgs.

New York: Pegasus Books, 2022.
ISBN: 978-1-6393-6153-3. x and
390 pages. Cloth. \$28.95.

Call William Blake enigmatic, off-center, or genius! John Higgs offers a compelling introduction to Blake's provocative life, poetry, and illuminations in this entertaining book. Higgs has spent many years appreciating Blake and researching

his interpreters. He offers an informed perspective on contested understandings of Blake's biography and artistic works. The book invites the reader to visit Blake's times and alternative universe.

At the heart of Blake's creativity was his license to imagine. Among all human capacities, imagination may be one of the least valued. Higgs comments: "The word 'enthusiasm' means to be inspired by the gods, and the gods, Blake reminds us, come from the imagination. It is through the imagination of human minds that purpose, meaning, and relevance enter this universe" (143). Imagination is the thread that ties together not only this book but Blake's legacy. "From Blake's perspective, the human universe was a process of continual becoming, whose most vital and fundamental aspect was imagination" (344).

Whereas in his own lifetime Blake lived on the edge of poverty, was little understood, and sometimes execrated, with the passing of time his work has become recognized for its brilliance. He developed his own method and style of creating plates for printing illuminated manuscripts, which he then illustrated. While eking out a living for his family by producing images on commission from benefactors, it is the poetic and visual universe he created out of his own imagination that provides the basis for fascination today. Higgs provides a useful introduction to the mythological world Blake created that intersects with biblical and historical themes always with originality.

For those interested in gaining familiarity with the life and work of Blake, this book is highly recommended. For those desiring primary sources, the illuminated manuscripts of Blake have been published by Princeton University Press in six gorgeous volumes. There are many editions of Blake's poetry and artwork in modestly priced print and digital editions. Over the years it has been striking to me how the symbolic world of Blake has become a strange attractor to those looking for fresh interpretations of Christianity beyond conventional categories. These include the "god is dead" theologians, Altizer and Hamilton. The world of Blake is angular to our accustomed thought patterns, thus one needs a spirit of adventure to sally forth.

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