



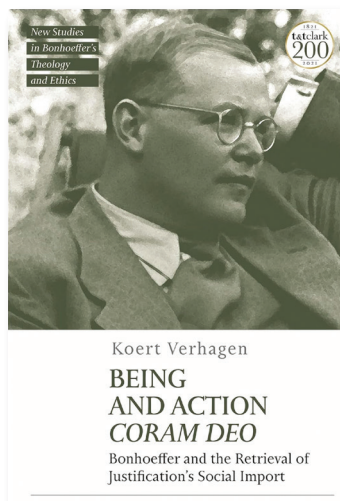
Book Reviews

April 2024

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

Review a book!

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Being and Action Coram Deo: Bonhoeffer and the Retrieval of Justification's Social Import. By Koert Verhagen. (New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Theology and Ethics.)

New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2023. ISBN: 978-0-5677-0349-1, ix and 171 pages. Paper. \$39.95.

Verhagen, Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Taylor University, Upland, Indiana, offers an intriguing exploration of the social importance of Bonhoeffer's understanding of justification.

Verhagen, after noting the renewed focus on the doctrine of justification following the attention given to it by “the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (1) and “the New Perspective on Paul” (2), argues that, despite this focus, the “social implications” (2) of the doctrine have been neglected. Thus, his aim with this volume is to bridge “the gap between doctrine and ethics and between soteriology and social action” (2) in conversation with Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part, consisting of chapters one through three, is anthropological in focus. Chapters four through six comprise the second part, which treats the topic of ethics. The seventh and final chapter offers a constructive account of how Bonhoeffer's doctrine of justification might be employed to confront white supremacy.

This monograph is filled with insights as it provides a thorough reading of Bonhoeffer in light of his tradition and social context. First off, drawing from such scholars as Krötke and DeJonge, the author makes the compelling case that Bonhoeffer was dependent on the insights of Martin Luther for his understanding of justification by faith and the anthropological entailments of the same. Verhagen summarizes

Luther's anthropology rooted in justification in the following way (25-26):

[J]ustification constitutes the shape and structure of one's relationship with God, with faith defining its substance. Thus, human ontology is extrinsically grounded and defined in terms of this relationship in which humanity exists *coram Deo* [before the face of God].

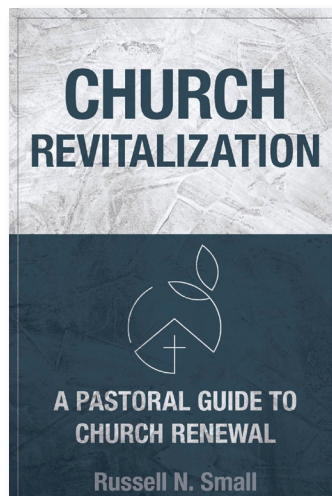
This priority of justification for Luther, and thus Bonhoeffer's anthropology, impacts humanity as created, fallen and, subsequently, reconciled to God, with reconciliation taking priority since it is only by faith that we are able to apprehend both creation and sin. By retrieving the insights of Luther, Verhagen argues that Bonhoeffer is able to counter “German idealist philosophy and a variety of theological accounts” (48) that saw human potential as the ground for human nature by focusing on “God's freedom and grace” (48) as the ground of humanity.

Further, it is fitting that the author extended Bonhoeffer's insights to the problem of white supremacy since, in the estimation of many, Bonhoeffer was one of its primary antagonists in his day. Powerfully, Verhagen makes the case that humanity as rooted in God's grace and freedom supports the dignity and worth of all human beings, non-Caucasians included.

One quibble must be mentioned regarding this otherwise superb work: Verhagen's sympathy with the Finnish school of Luther interpretation may not be appreciated by all.

To conclude, this sophisticated, well-argued exploration of the role of justification in Bonhoeffer's thought persuasively builds a bridge from doctrine to ethics and, for that reason, among others, it ought to garner a wide readership.

Thomas Haviland-Pabst
Montreat College, Asheville, North Carolina



Church Revitalization: A Pastoral Guide to Church Renewal. By Russell N. Small.

Chicago: Kregel, 2021. ISBN: 978-0-8254-4753-2. 232 pages. Paper. \$16.93.

Over the last few years, many books have been written on church revitalization. However, none presents a more holistic approach to the matter than Russell

Small's book *Church Revitalization: A Pastoral Guide to Church Renewal*. Small serves as Senior Pastor at Liberty Baptist Church in Appomattox, Virginia, which he effectively led through revitalization, and serves as a church revitalization strategist with



the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia. He is also Assistant Professor at Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity.

Small offers a practical and comprehensive book on church revitalization. The book is well-rounded. The book is not a book of tips and quick fixes. It is informational and very strategic. The book is written from a pastoral viewpoint for pastors who are about to embark or are already on a journey of leading church revitalization. It is designed not only to help revitalize declining churches but also to develop the skills of those who lead the process.

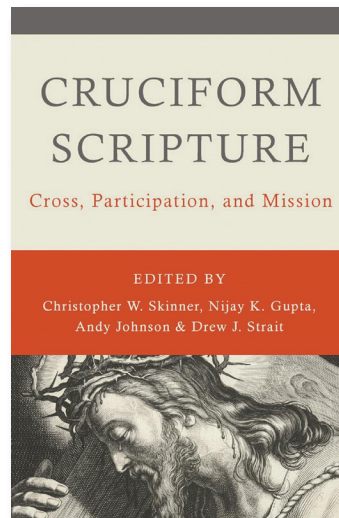
The book is not just a how-to but a guide for revitalizing pastors on efficiently assessing a declining church. Instead, it provides a fresh perspective because Small identifies four different types of revitalizations: refresh, renovate, restore, and replant. Refresh is the most fitting after a difficult season in a church's life. Renovate is needed when a decline has lasted five to ten years. Restore is appropriate for churches with generational patterns focused on survival. Replant is best for a church facing imminent closure.

The strength of this book is its practical aspect and structure; the content of the book is applicable. Its structure flows from understanding revitalization to assessing for revitalization, prepping the pastor and staff, developing and implementing a plan, managing possible conflict, and maintaining and adjusting as needed. The book systematically walks pastors through leading a church out of a decline. The weakness of this book is that it needs to pay more attention to the spiritual. Small addresses the pastor's spiritual health but neglects the importance of improving the congregation's spiritual health. The reason for a church's decline is the result of a spiritually unhealthy congregation. The church's spirituality must be addressed to be effective.

This is an excellent book for any pastor who has been called to lead a church through revitalization. It is also recommended for first-time pastors who have been called to a well-established church that is facing decline. This book could be a resource to help guide them through such a formidable task for a first pastor.

Arvin D. Medlock Jr.

Pastor, Friendship Baptist Church, Lynchburg, Virginia



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 New Testament 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 New Testament 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.).

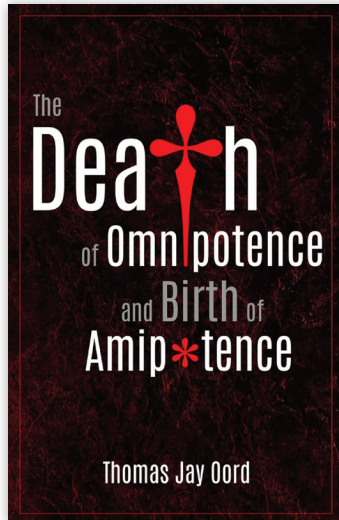
Also of note is the essay by Sylvia C. Keesmaat titled "Citizenship and Empire: A Missional Engagement with Ephesians" (which the author posits is a genuine Pauline letter). She contends that Ephesians is a rich mine of evidence on early Christian thinking about their own peoplehood, including what it 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, San Luis Obispo, California



The Death of Omnipotence and Birth of Amipotence.

By Thomas Jay Oord.

Monee, Illinois: SacraSage, 2023.
ISBN: 978-1-9486-0990-6. v and 159 pages. Cloth. \$22.99.

In this slim volume Thomas Jay Oord describes and advances a change in how people of faith can most truly speak of a God worthy of their worship. Oord directs the Center for Open

and Relational Theology at Northwind Theological Seminary. Northwind is a young school, established in 2019. "Going" to school at Northwind will be strikingly different from what happens in the classrooms of long-established theological institutions, for it is a 100% online institution. But major changes in the "how" of the preparation of leaders in ministry may be outdone by a potentially revolutionary proposal regarding "what" is to be said of God. Oord believes we need to stop speaking of God as omnipotent. He calls his readers to recover the normative divine attribute of love in a birth of "amipotence."

Three of the book's four chapters are given to making the case for the deletion of the language of omnipotence. He knows that he is at work in the major leagues in his critique. Two historic creeds and who can count the hymn stanzas? Yes, fundamentalist praise songs but also the likes of Augustine, Calvin, and Wolfhart Pannenberg. People using the term sometimes seem to be saying that God literally does everything. Or that God can do absolutely anything. Or, thirdly, that God can control others or given circumstances. In Chapter One we see that Oord's proposal is reformatory. The biblical God finds no home in any of the three senses of omnipotence. This God is a lover and love is deeply relational. The Creator uses, indeed "needs," the creatures. To speak of God as "almighty" rests on mistranslations of *shaddai*, *sabaoth* and *pantokrator*. An all-holding God is not an all-controlling God.

Chapter Two draws on philosophical analysis to argue that

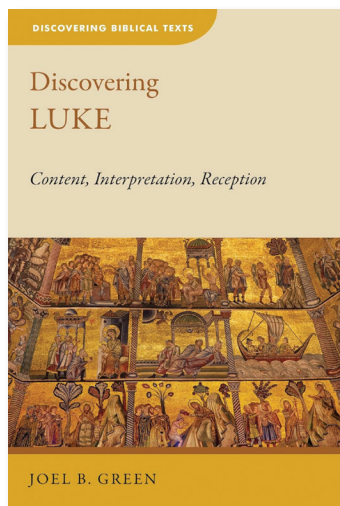
the advocates of omnipotence are defending a claim that dies the death of a thousand qualifications. Give up the on-life-support claim! It is Chapter Three on the problem of evil that closes the case. How many earnest believers have asked why doesn't my omnipotent God cure my brain cancer? Why did my son's plane have to be the one that went into the Atlantic? What was the all-powerful GOD doing on All Saints Day in Lisbon when the 8.5 quake hit? Was this our omnipotent God punishing the 30,000 wicked, as was claimed? You just can't cling to a good-intending, omnipotent God, given the inescapable problem of evil.

So, what is to replace the corpse of omnipotence? Oord takes to word-making, claiming the Latin prefix for love to speak of the birth of amipotence. He has written of love in earlier books, but I wish we had here a couple more chapters set in this informative contrast to omnipotence. It's all here in forty pages: the biblical witness, philosophical analysis, and human experience. God's power is "maximal," as God is active everywhere in the universe. But it is not power that plays the role John Wesley called the "reigning" attribute. "Love comes first." (126) Other descriptors of God must be aligned with love's priority.

This is an important book for those who would speak of God—in preaching, teaching, counseling, and other ministerial functions. There are many attractive risk-taking initiatives such as sections on love and politics and love and inter-faith relations. But, most importantly, the person of faith must decide whether to attend the funeral for omnipotence. The *fides quae creditur* will take differing shapes depending on how one responds. Historically, Christianity has stressed particular events in history such as the Exodus and the Exile in the shaping of Israel as God's chosen people. Then, later, the manger and the cross. Oord finds a focus in what God is "always" doing. This difference between the particular and the universal will yield subordinate differences. For example, Alpha and Omega. In amipotence we recognize that "God never exists without creation and never has a monopoly on power." (56) Indeed "...God necessarily gifts the elements of otherness to creatures great and small...to all things, now and forever" (148). Is there an absolute here that Christians can faithfully and fruitfully claim? The "omnis" may not stand or fall together. Oord closes his exciting journey by professing that "Love's ultimate victory" will come through God's "relentless love" (148). That seems a quality beyond compare.

Paul R. Sponheim

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Discovering Luke.

By Joel B. Green.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021.
ISBN: 978-0-8028-7496-2. xii and
247 pages. Paper. \$22.00.

In this overview of Luke's Gospel, Joel Green approaches Luke as literature. Instead of looking at Luke as a series of small, disjointed pieces, Green seeks to examine the full narrative. This is an up-to-date and thorough overview of the

current state of Lukan scholarship and serves as a good introduction to the conversations around the Third Gospel. It is also a distinctly Christian approach, considering Luke's impact on a life of faith.

Chapters 1 and 2 look at the reception of Luke throughout church history by focusing on interpretations of the Magnificat (Mary's song in Luke 1:46-55) because this passage is found only in Luke and because it includes major themes that continue throughout the Gospel. After quoting from church-based commentators from the early church to the Middle Ages and from the Reformation to the present, Green discusses reflections on Mary's song in the modern and postmodern eras when interpretation has moved from theological lessons for the church to higher criticism and socially located critiques. Beyond being an interesting study of the reception history of the Magnificat, the first two chapters of this book are a useful case study for understanding approaches to biblical interpretation throughout history.

Chapter 3 turns to the context and text of Luke itself, surveying the Third Gospel's comparisons with the other synoptic Gospels; the author, audience, genre, and dating; and the question of whether Luke-Acts is one literary unit (Green concludes that it is). This chapter is similar to the introduction of a commentary.

Chapter 4 is concerned with "mapping" Luke's Gospel culturally and geographically. It also includes a section on Luke's spatial metaphors such as "up-down," to turn back to the Magnificat, where God lifts up the lowly and pulls down the powerful.

Chapter 5 goes through the literary architecture of the Gospel, section by section, showing how each piece fits into the overarching narrative of the continuing story of God's people, "aimed at persuading its auditors and readers to comprehend Jesus according to the Scriptures ... and to respond accordingly" (129).

Chapter 6 looks at how Luke's narrative focuses on God and God's purpose of saving God's people. Chapter 7 spotlights Jesus as the "central character of (Luke's) narrative" (162). While

Green considers Luke's Gospel a history and not a biography, the main thrust of the evangelist's work is biographic narrative about Jesus.

Chapter 8 concludes the book and is likely the most useful for pastors as it delves into aspects of discipleship. The focus is on the allegiant response Christians should have to God's offer of salvation through Jesus in Luke.

This well-balanced book is certainly academic, even while the clear prose and limited footnotes make reading accessible for everyday readers. It would be an excellent textbook for a master's level class. It would also serve as a good resource for teachers and preachers to draw on for Sunday school classes and for sermons.

Becky Castle Miller

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God Can't: How to Believe in God and Love After Tragedy, Abuse, and Other Evils. By Thomas Jay Oord.

Grasmere, Idaho: SacraSage Press,
2019. ISBN: 978-1-9486-0912-8.
vii and 202 pages. Paper. \$19.99.

Thomas Jay Oord makes the incredibly bold claim to "solve" the problem of evil within this text, and in five steps, no less. Oord

begins his argument with two assumptions; first that God's very being, or character, is love and of a loving nature (11). The second assumption is that gratuitous, or genuine, evil exists in the world (12-13). One can tell that these ideas are heavily influenced by Open Theism even without it being explicitly named in the text. With these in mind, Oord begins laying out his argument, one chapter per step, using real life stories and experiences to move theodicy from the realm of theory into lived reality.

In brief, Oord's points are: First, God cannot prevent evil *singlehandedly* (17). Second, God truly feels creation's pain and suffering (48). Third, God wants to heal those who have been harmed or experienced suffering (79). This third point has four subpoints within it, including God is omnipresent/loving, God walks alongside creation, God can't heal singlehandedly, and God's love extends beyond death (88-97). Fourth, God can "squeeze the good from the bad" (113). Finally, God requires our participation in solving evil (142).

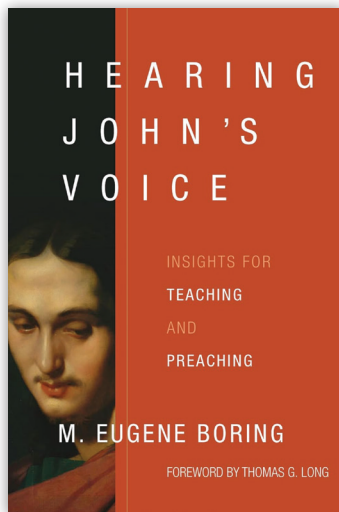
There are many positives with this text. For starters it is written in accessible and clear language, opening the audience well beyond the world of academics. Furthermore, Oord includes discussion questions at the end of each chapter to encourage



deeper consideration and reading with a group. However, the accessible language is also a shortcoming, as the reader may be left desiring further explanation, citations to sources alluded to, and historical or biblical support for the claims being made. Among its greatest points is the applicability of Oord's idea to real life, which he does throughout the chapters.

Oord, in this text, successfully presents his solution to the ever-vexing problem of evil. Through his five steps, Oord identifies shortcomings of traditional images of God, offers his alternatives, and seeks a way forward. This book would be well worth the time of pastors and congregation members to engage in a new way of thinking about evil. It is up to the reader if Oord truly succeeds in answering the ancient question of evil.

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***Hearing John's Voice:
Insights for Teaching
and Preaching.*** By M.
Eugene Boring.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019.
ISBN: 978-0-8028-7546-4. xiv
and 351 pages. Paper. \$32.99.

This book is the first of two volumes by the longtime Brite Divinity School New Testament professor. The second volume is *Hearing Paul's Voice*. Both seek to provide

“historically informed and pastorally sensitive reading” for “contemporary preachers and teachers” (from the back cover). His many exegetical insights are derived from years of teaching and preaching in mainstream Protestant settings.

The book begins with a preface from Thomas G. Long of Candler School of Theology, followed by a prologue (with concluding epilogue) adaptation of the Walk to Emmaus story (Luke 24:13–35). The book consists of four chapters: Chapter 1, Beginning at the End; Chapter 2, The Revelation of Jesus Christ and the One True God; Chapter 3, Tensions and Conflicts in the Beloved Community: The Johannine Letters; and Chapter 4, Retelling the Jesus Christ Story: Soundings in the Theology of the Gospel of John. The book concludes with end notes, bibliography, indexes of names and subjects, plus Scripture and other ancient sources. The book is punctuated with block quotes from a variety of theologians, poets, novelists, and preachers. The author's writing style is easy to follow, and his use of end notes is not extensive.

Boring's prologue makes the case for his beginning with the Book of Revelation: “we must understand the biblical texts in their own terms ... before we interpret them and integrate

their message into our own theology. We begin with Revelation because it presents us with a number of crucial issues that face us throughout the New Testament” (5). Boring's definition of apocalyptic is derived from John J. Collins (44). The violent and conflicting imagery of apocalyptic writings, like Revelation, are often avoided by mainstream preachers and teachers who tend to favor a more palatable message for their audiences. Boring regards Bultmann's project of demythologization as a sincere attempt to make sense of the miraculous without rejecting or peeling it away (63). Much of Boring's discussion of Revelation's genre (prophetic-apocalyptic letter) and key themes (theology, Christology, ecclesiology) is derived from his useful commentary in the WJK Interpretation series. Helpful application insights are interspersed with keen exegetical findings, reflecting the best of post-Bultmannian scholarship in the twenty-first century.

Boring's discussion of the Johannine letters does not shy away from viewing some early form of Gnosticism threatening the communities of Asia. The book's approach to John's Gospel follows the two-level drama outlined by J. Louis Martyn (222) without losing focus on the importance of John's story world (209). For Boring, the gospel has “certain similarities to the Hellenistic biography (*bios*).... But the gospel is not a ‘biography of Jesus’ because it has distinctive hallmarks: the deity and humanity of Jesus, paradox, secrecy, denouement, and contemporality” (169). Reading John's Gospel on its own terms, Boring argues that no virginal conception is assumed, but the humanity and divinity of Jesus are held in paradoxical tension (204–5). The entire Johannine corpus constitutes the diverse writings of a Johannine community. The final edition of the Gospel was attributed to the Beloved Disciple, its “probable founder” (131).

There is much to be gleaned from this book. Boring's interpretations are mainstream and balanced. His exegesis is well-reasoned. Boring's conclusions and applications are noteworthy with helpful outside reading from theology, poetry, sermons, and hymnology.

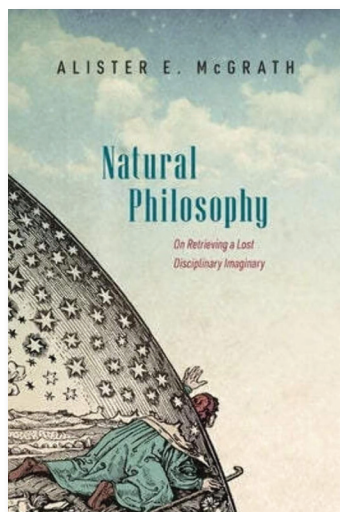
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***Natural Philosophy:
On Retrieving a
Lost Disciplinary
Imaginary.*** By Alister
E. McGrath.

Oxford University Press, 2023,
ISBN 978-0-1928-6573-1. 248
pages. Hardcover. \$41.99.

How do science and religion fit together? How should we evaluate the truth claims of physics, theology, and philosophy, and other fields? How does

one adjudicate between the many disciplinary voices? It is not uncommon, both among scholars and in the public mind, to assume that it is science that speaks the genuine truth, and all other claims must be measured by its standards. But there is much in the human experience of nature on which science has nothing to say. In *Natural Philosophy: On Retrieving a Lost Disciplinary Imaginary*, Alister McGrath suggests we learn from the natural philosophy tradition to develop a more adequate view of nature than is available from science alone.

McGrath's first section lays a historical foundation. From Aristotle through the "early modern scientists," the study of nature was called "natural philosophy," not "science." The two expressions mark an important difference. Natural philosophers studied the natural world from a wider perspective than scientists today. Astronomer and mathematician Johannes Kepler's reflections on nature touched on theology, mathematics, aesthetics, and ethics. Robert Boyle, a pioneer chemist, looked to the study of nature as a way to explore theology and ethics in a less divisive way than religion. As these examples illustrate, the natural philosophers spoke readily of aesthetic, moral, and spiritual aspects of nature. Their worldview was holistic. But by the early nineteenth century a new scientific perspective had emerged. Science focused on facts. It was to be "value-neutral." It could say nothing about the beauty, the grandeur, or the moral value of nature.

But humans' experience of the natural world is about much more than physically demonstrable facts. We are struck by nature's beauty. We are moved to commune with divine reality in response to nature's power and awesomeness. We love and care for animals. Science can only provide a limited account of these aspects of nature and our experience of it.

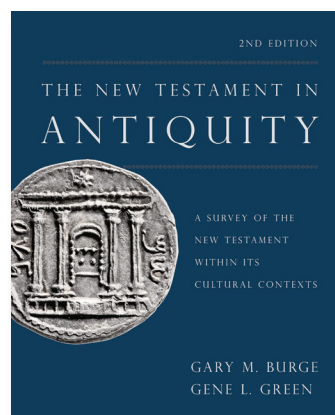
To help us toward a more holistic view, McGrath recommends a retrieval of the practice of seeing nature "through many eyes" (169), finding ways to weave what we "see" into a coherent whole. Communities of scholars, each working within their own discipline, can network, share their knowledge, and collaborate to form a grander vision of the natural world than is possible

in any one field alone. McGrath draws on insights from Karl Popper and Mary Midgley to suggest models for understanding the multiple layers of our encounter with the natural world. We have different maps to show different aspects of one territory. So also different disciplines communicate different truths about one world. "There is nothing wrong with science," he writes, "save that there is more that needs to be said and seen" (183).

This is an insightful work, not just for scholars, but for anyone interested in recognizing and respecting all the dimensions of the natural world in which we live.

Roger P. Ebertz

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***The New Testament in
Antiquity: A Survey
of the New Testament
Within Its Cultural
Contexts.*** By Gary M.
Burge and Gene L.
Green.

2d ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan,
2020. ISBN: 978-0-3105-3132-6.
623 pages. Cloth. \$59.99.

This revised edition of *The New Testament in Antiquity* is 25% substantially rewritten, with many photographs updated and bibliographies brought up to date (see, e.g., p. 13). Photographs, charts, sidebars, and color maps illustrate well the text and enhance understanding for their intended audience of the beginning New Testament student. There are also online resources for the instructor: presentation slides, chapter quizzes, sample syllabus, and image/map library. Much of the updated bibliographies, though, are from fellow Evangelicals and represent only one segment of biblical scholarship.

The textbook opens with chapters on Studying the New Testament, Historical Setting, the World of Jesus, the World of Paul, and Sources for the Story of Jesus and his Teachings (with their own modest criteria for the historical Jesus). There follows a discussion of each of the New Testament books in separate chapters. The textbook emphasizes historical and cultural context with insights from archaeology, cultural anthropology (honor, shame), and Jewish and Greco-Roman or "non-canonical" sources. Thematic outlines capture content adequately. Hellenistic rhetoric is explained but not implemented. Good attention is paid to certain literary forms (parables, household codes). A sidebar discussion of women and 1 Timothy 2 is tackled, though I wanted to find some mention of financially secure Roman women who were breaking with traditional roles according to Sallust and Cicero. The discussion of the message of each book is helpful.

Although authorship and date issues are dutifully discussed,



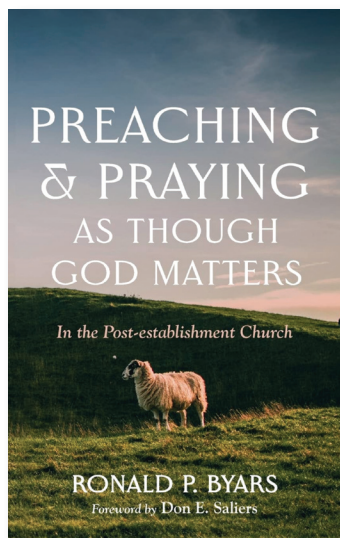
the authors consistently endorse apostolic authorship and early dating, even for 2 Peter. I admit that dating and authorship are debatable issues with our limited data, but using disputed and undisputed categories, for example, with Paul's writings should not lessen one's high view of the New Testament as Scripture. Dating Mark's Gospel just before or after 70 CE (but not decades earlier), for example, seems to me a balanced academic assessment. Even Martin Luther questioned the apostolic authorship of James because it challenged Paul's teaching on justification by faith. And John Calvin expressed doubts about the authorship of 2 Peter. Conservative scholar, I. Howard Marshall, has referred to the Pastoral Epistles as "allonymous" letters written by Paul's disciples. I was surprised that the fourth century dating of the Muratorian fragment by Sundberg and Hahneman was not discussed, since an early date for the fragment was used to bolster many of their arguments for apostolic authorship and canonicity.

The setting and message of Revelation are presented with helpful illustrations, but the outmoded approaches of the idealist (good vs. evil) and historicist (Hitler as the Beast) views are once again expounded, although they are discounted by the authors. The final section has brief but well-illustrated discussions of the text and canon of the NT. It also includes Scriptural, Non-Canonical, and Subject Indexes.

This book will provide the beginning student with very good exposure to the message of the New Testament within its historical and cultural context.

Charles B. Puskas

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***Preaching and Praying
as Though God
Matters: in the Post-
establishment Church.***
By Ronald P. Byars.

Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books,
2022. ISBN: 978-1-6667-4709-6.
140 pages. \$22.00.

Many mainline churches are "thinning out" aspects of faith considered "unreasonable" by enlightenment standards (e.g., incarnation, resurrection) in an attempt to be taken seriously

(6). But without these elements, Ronald Byars points out, the church has no reason for being. We are left theologically bereft and lose sight of the God we claim to trust.

Chapter 1 notes some reasons for this theological thinning out. Many mainline preachers fear sounding like preachers who have aligned themselves with right-wing politics and spoken of God in harmful ways. As a result, they preach as one who is

adamantly not like those preachers and connect biblical texts to social justice issues rather than diving into their theological depths. Byars acknowledges that God's Word rarely comes to us without ethical implications; however, the ethical implication is not by itself the Word and rarely requires the God of Jesus Christ.

In Chapter 2, Byars lays out his primary argument to aid this theological thinning out: the church needs both Word and Sacrament together. The infrequent practice of the Eucharist in protestant contexts has contributed to the loss of the Word in preaching. Chapter 3 continues this line by asserting that preaching's sacramental purpose, manifesting "the presence of Christ by means of human speech," becomes misunderstood or even eliminated without the regular practice of the Eucharist (49). Preaching is reduced to a mere lecture or motivational speech.

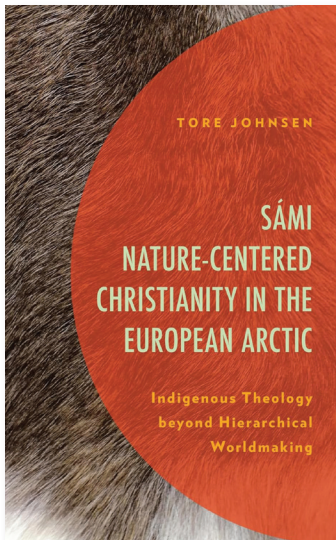
The latter half of Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 challenge the heaven-or-hell framework that diminishes the theological focus to individual salvation and raises anxieties in need of constant reassurance. Byars agrees with many mainline preachers that this framework can be harmful and is reductionistic, yet we need not be left theologically bereft. The hope of Christianity is the cosmic reign of God made visible in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit speaks to us today not to tell us who is and is not going to heaven but to give us "warm hearts to replace hard hearts" as we participate in God's healing of all people and all of creation (66).

Chapter 5 urges preachers to speak of the Trinity without filtering God through enlightenment rationality and removing all mystery. Such a move often removes God's intimate relationality. Chapter 6 focuses on the relational aspects of Jesus' ministry as a "down payment" on the healing and restoration God has in store for the whole of creation. Chapter 7 suggests that Pentecost also functions as a "down payment" on God's project "to fashion a new heaven and a new earth" (118). Chapter 8 invites us to reclaim and value our intuition and experience of God rather than sacrifice them at the altar of reason.

Preaching and Praying as though God Matters is full of many parable-like asides and trails off the beaten path filled with gems of wisdom for the reader to pick up and ponder. On the journey, Byars calls progressive preachers back to the Eucharist and assures them that there lies good news for all that really includes all.

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Sami Nature-Centered Christianity in The European Arctic: Indigenous Theology beyond Hierarchical Worldmaking. By Tore Johnsen.

Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2022. ISBN: 978-1-7936-5293-5. 297 pages. Cloth. \$120.00.

This is an extremely thoughtful and methodically constructed study of a limited subject with wide ramifications. The book was

originally a PhD dissertation in World Christianity from the University of Edinburgh. It is based on in-depth interviews with twenty-eight research participants, all of them Indigenous Sami people living in northern Norway, conducted by the author, a native Sami pastor ordained in the Norwegian Lutheran Church who has served Sami congregations. The study carefully and respectfully seeks to inquire into the character of what the author calls “North Sami everyday Christianity” and its special “nature-centered-faith.” Johnsen probes how his own indigenous people’s Christian worldview might provide useful perspective for the larger church.

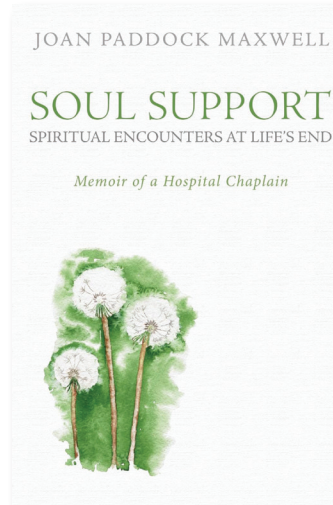
To accomplish this ambitious goal, the author first orients readers to what it means to do “decolonial theology” in the Arctic. This leads to a chapter on “deconstructing historical Lutheran discourses on the Sami tradition” and another that brings insights from native American and African indigenous theologies and worldviews to bear in a comparative sense. At the heart of the study are chapters that report findings from his interviews with Sami Christians on their “enacted faith,” as well as what he calls the “religio-philosophical framing of local Sami everyday Christianity.” Here Johnsen uncovers a rich set of “blessing” practices which express Sami reverence for being a part of the natural world. They do so in a way that is peculiarly trinitarian and reveals ties with the Laestadian revivalist lay movement that was influential with their piety.

A whole chapter is devoted to detailing the complicated story of how a decade ago the Church of Norway deliberated adopting a Sami-origin ritual for “house blessing” that some feared might open the door to occult practices and nature worship. The author hopes that exposure to a larger sense of our human embeddedness in nature might help lead the larger church to move beyond its predominant “stewardship model.” Johnsen views “cosmological responsibility” as a “managerial metaphor” that objectifies the earth rather than seeing it as a part of creation along with humanity (235).

The study is amply footnoted, contains a helpful “North

Sami-English Glossary,” an “Invitation Letter” used with interviewees, and an “Interview Guide,” as well as an extensive twenty-page bibliography. While the number of Sami today estimated to be living in the four nations of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia is at most 90,000, 50,000-60,000 live in Norway (9). This small minority of indigenous Arctic-dwellers comprise a fascinating group of Christians, from whom, as this book teaches, we have much to learn!

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Soul Support: Spiritual Encounters at Life's End: Memoir of a Hospital Chaplain. By Joan Paddock Maxwell.

Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, Resource Publications, 2017.
ISBN:978-1-5326-1874-1. 230 pages. Paper. \$12.55.

This is a memoir of Episcopal Chaplain Joan Paddock Maxwell as she recounts stories of the

mystery of a higher power’s presence in acute care in a palliative care hospital in Washington, D.C., where she served for seven years. Palliative care is not to be confused with hospice care. It is the care-giving process for individuals diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. The time of death is unknown, be it weeks or years ahead, as a cure is still sought. The palliative care chaplain accompanies the patient along the journey as they come to grips with their spiritual worldview, regardless of level of their faith, while facing the reality of the foreseeable future. Putting her Episcopal church beliefs aside, Chaplain Maxwell respects and supports the patients’ worldview of their place in the world, be they atheist or they hold to other religious traditions. Seeking inner order of life and its meaning for the person seems to be a common thread throughout the three larger chapters of the book: Listening, Learning, and Loving.

One common pattern Maxwell detects are people who are not affiliated with any sort of organized religious community but can still view themselves as “spiritual.” Maxwell identifies four other ways people can be spiritual without being active in organized religion. First awareness of the inner spirit, or inner self (Jung) or Altman (Hindu belief) within the person. Second, personal relationships with family or close community creates a spiritual bond. Nature is another common way to experience spirituality — through a sunset, deer running through the woods or the sound of flowing outdoor waters. Finally, creative works such as paintings, music, dance, novels, astronomy, science, and



philosophy are spiritual expressions of faith in a higher power. Love of grandchildren, playing a piano, or camping by a lake are spiritual experiences which should be respected. The mystery of God or a higher power is present in all these expressions of life. They may be all that the person in palliative care has to hang onto in their spiritual journey.

“Listening,” for Maxwell began after tragedy in her life challenged this chaplain’s own faith. With experience of witnessing other deaths, Maxwell realizes that God is mystery, which is often revealed in silent prayer, while realizing that end of life translates into lack of control regardless of success or wealth in life. End of life reviews usually force a person with limited time to live to examine what meaning their lives have had. AIDS patients, prison inmates, homeless people and illegal immigrants — all have precious stories to share.

“Learning” entails a ministry of presence with individuals of differing or little understanding of God. Embracing mystery is a common thread of these memoirs. “Loving” is to nurture people in their efforts to offer final farewells in life.

While church clergy are not addressed, this book serves chaplains well.

David Coffin

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