



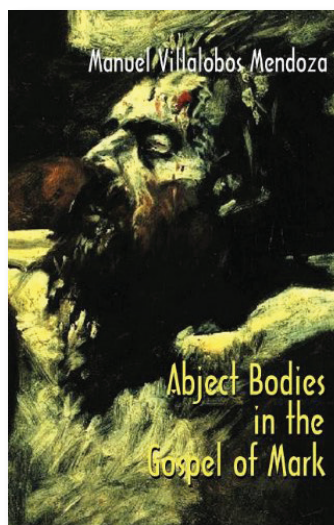
Book Reviews

July 2021

Section Editors: Craig Nesson, Ralph Klein, Troy Troftgruben

Review a book!

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Abject Bodies in the Gospel of Mark. By Manuel Villalobos Mendoza. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-9109-2827-1. ix & 210 pages. Paper. \$28.50.

In his 2014 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, Fernando F. Segovia laid out the need for “a fusion of the critical and the political, the biblical and the

worldly,” a hermeneutic characterized by bringing theories and experiences from the Global North and the Global South into critical conversation with one another.¹ Answering the same critical call, Manuel Villalobos Mendoza’s work does just this. Published in hardcopy just two years prior to Segovia laying out the work of *glocal* criticism in a systematic way, Villalobos Mendoza embodies the dialectic between the global and the local in both his personal experience and scholarly engagement.

Reading Mark’s passion narrative through an autobiographical/ideological hermeneutic that he names *del otro lado* (lit. “on the other side”), Villalobos Mendoza characterizes both himself and his reading by intersections, or crossings, of: sexuality, claiming for himself the term *del otro lado*, a term for homosexuality in his Mexican context; nationality, with the crossing of the *Rio Grande* symbolizing his immigration to the U.S.; and religiosity, holding in tension his position as both a Roman Catholic scholar and a critic of the abuses suffered under the auspices of Roman Catholicism. Villalobos Mendoza skillfully combines erudite theories of gender and power from Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva with lived experiences of men, women, and children in the rural Mexican village in which he

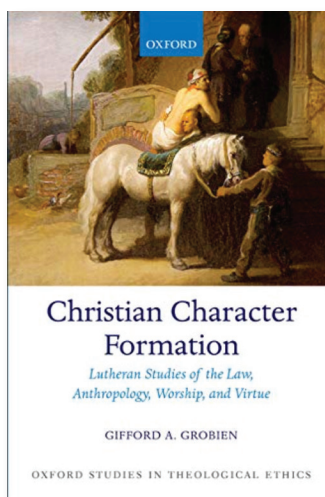
grew up. In this way he highlights the lives of characters in Mark’s passion whom he reads as abject and *descarados/as*, “barefaced,” leading up to an analysis of Jesus’ own body as vulnerable and abject on the cross.

After an autobiographical introduction that situates the study of Jesus’ body within the life and devotional practices of the church, Villalobos Mendoza turns the focus to four characters whom he argues Mark portrays as crossing gender and power norms: the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus, christened Pola; the unnamed enslaved girl in the high priest’s court, christened Rebequita; the unnamed man carrying a water jug, christened Nachito; and finally, Jesus himself. Villalobos Mendoza does not shy away from the complexities of Butler and Kristeva’s theories; however, the application of these theories to concrete characters in the biblical narrative, interlaced with stories from Mexican village life, brings both new life and insight that are likely to inspire and challenge scholars and pastors alike.

Villalobos Mendoza paints a compelling picture of a savior who not only liberates from oppression but crosses the boundaries of such oppressions with his own body to do so. It is unfortunate that this view of liberation contrasts itself at points with a narrow view of gender and ethnic roles in the first-century, such as a caricature of Jewish dietary laws that has been used to reinforce the Christian triumphalism Villalobos Mendoza seems to resist. However, the overall argument of the book does not rely on such contrasts. Moreover, by not shying away from complexities in other arenas, such as the intersections of slavery and childhood in the case of Rebequita, or the dynamics of language at play between Jesus and the Roman centurion, this study does more to build up a case for expansive inclusion than it does to tear down. Overall, I highly recommend it as a compelling and challenging text that raises questions critical both to Markan scholarship and the ministry and service of Christ’s church in the present.

Amy Lindeman Allen

Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana



Christian Character Formation: Lutheran Studies of the Law, Anthropology, Worship, and Virtue. By Gifford Grobman. Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2019. ISBN 978-0-1987-4619-5. Cloth. 241 pages. \$90.00.

This is a careful, although tedious, study that aims to create a theological case for the third use of the law to help

1. Fernando F. Segovia, “Criticism in Critical Times: Reflections on Vision and Task,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134:1 (2015), 6.



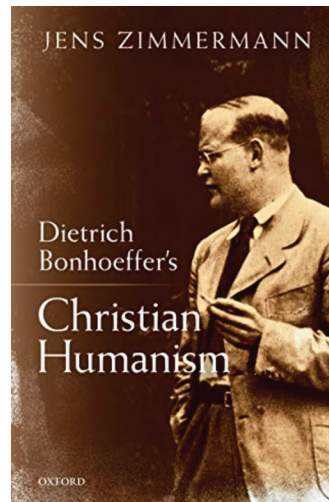
San Luis Obispo, California

the church in its calling of character formation as the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. This is basic to the work of Christian ethics, which Lutherans are sometimes thought to neglect in their neuralgia for works righteousness and fear of indulging either in legalism or antinomianism. Beginning with a close look at justification by faith in scripture and the teaching of the church culminating in Luther and other Lutheran theologians, it is remarkable that the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* is never mentioned, which was officially adopted by the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican at Augsburg, Germany in 1999 (See my “Justification in Literature: The Witness of Two Russian Masters,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47 [Fall 2012]: 593–603 on how both Lutheran and Roman Catholic “poles” of the *JDDJ* are illustrated in short stories by Tolstoy and Chekhov).

Succeeding chapters take up the topics of the divine law in Christian ethics, “twofold righteousness” in the Lutheran tradition, character formation, and “union with Christ.” This is done with reference to the Eastern teaching of *theosis* and its Western counterpart of deification in relation to the “Finnish School” of Luther interpretation, which the author argues has built a bridge between *theosis* and Lutheran understandings of justification. After a difficult chapter on personhood and righteousness in communion with Christ, there follows what I judge the most successful chapter, laying out how character formation is best seen in the context of Christian worship. The author claims that “the formation of explicitly Christian formation must be a worship life centered around Word and sacraments in which people are united in Christ, marked and empowered by the Spirit, and use this spiritual power through reflection and prayer to exercise membership in Christian ethical formation” (211).

Final chapters discuss the topic of Christian virtues (the habituation of ethical behavior akin to Stanley Hauerwas’ “character ethics”) and the “meta-virtues” of faith and love from which all Christian living flows. The everyday use of Luther’s *Small* and *Large Catechism* is strongly recommended as well as regular liturgical and sacramental participation. This “offers a structure for Christian ethical formation, especially congruent with a classically Lutheran way of thinking . . . one way to conceive of Lutheran ethics that upholds justification, law and gospel, Christian anthropology, Word and sacrament, and the formative power of language and community” (224). All this, Grobian explains, is in “the dominant place of the accusatory function of the law [which] has tempted some to neglect and abandon a constructive role for the law, focusing instead on forgiveness of sins and freedom from the burden of sin and the law.” “One consequence is the weakening of moral theology and a rich understanding of the Christian life” (223–224) and a revived appreciation of sanctification among Lutherans.

John Rollefson, retired ELCA pastor



Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism.

By Jens Zimmermann.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
ISBN: 978-0-1988-3256-0. Kindle. 364 pages. \$99.99.

Jens Zimmermann is a scholar who has published widely to advocate for Christian humanism, drawing on biblical and patristic as well as Thomistic, Reformation, modern Roman Catholic, and Orthodox sources. Here he recruits Dietrich Bonhoeffer for the Christian humanist cause, making a substantial case for fresh interpretation of the German Lutheran theologian, who was martyred by the Nazis in 1945, as the foremost example of this honored, though hardly in vogue theological tradition. While admitting that Bonhoeffer seldom refers to the tradition of Christian humanism itself, the author exhaustively explores Bonhoeffer’s writings, from his earliest student papers to his ruminations from prison, to make a strong case for seeing him as one who understands the goal of authentic humanization as what salvation in Jesus Christ betokens.

For Zimmermann, this is rooted in the incarnational starting point of Bonhoeffer’s theology, Christ “having-become-human” (*menschgewachsene*), not just taking “incarnation” as a theological principle but a unique, historical event (3). Bonhoeffer refers to the triadic grounding points of his theology in crib (*Krippe*), cross, and resurrection. As Bonhoeffer wrote in his *Ethics*: “While we exert ourselves to grow beyond our humanity, to leave the human behind us, God becomes human and we must recognize that God wills that we be human, real human beings” (177). Christian ethics becomes “the concrete historical work of allowing this ultimate reality to become manifest in one’s life circumstances” (196).

While carefully tracing the evolution of Bonhoeffer’s theology, the author emphasizes the strong continuity of his Christian humanist orientation through his radical prison musings, as he grappled with the implications of “a world come of age” and being Christian in a “post-religious” age. As Zimmermann observes: “In looking ahead to a post-war era, Bonhoeffer imagined a church where political influence was restricted to serving a secular society by leavening every sphere of activity with Christian virtue. He envisioned a Lutheran church that would:

Tell a human being in any profession what a life in Christ looks like, what it means to be there for others.



The church would speak of moderation, authenticity, trust, faithfulness, steadfastness, patience, discipline, humility, modesty, contentment... . The church's word gains weight and power not through concepts but by example (321).

Beginning with "The Idea of Christian Humanism," Zimmermann lays out the case for Bonhoeffer's Christian humanism by taking up his understanding of theological anthropology; creation, fall and the *imago dei*; hermeneutics; ethics; biblical theology; and political theology. Even for those well-versed in Bonhoeffer's *oeuvre*, Zimmermann offers a refreshing immersion in Bonhoeffer's development as a theologian, with the benefit of expert commentary on those who influenced him, both among his contemporaries and from the great tradition of the church. Zimmermann concludes by affirming Bonhoeffer's Christian humanism as a vital resource for our secular age, especially in its multicultural, multireligious, and confounding political contexts.

*John Rollefson, retired ELCA pastor
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The First Christian Believer
In Search of John the Baptist



Rivka Nir

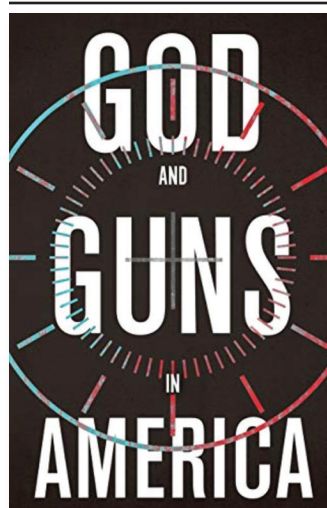
The First Christian Believer: In Search of John the Baptist.

By Rivka Nir. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2019. ISBN: 978-1-9109-2855-4, xv & 324 pages. Paper. \$42.99.

In *The First Christian Believer*, Rivka Nir seeks to position John the Baptist squarely in the Christian tradition. The book emerged out of Nir's MA thesis

submitted to Tel Aviv University and is a translation from Hebrew. Pastors will probably not find much use for the book as it is fairly technical, and in many ways idiosyncratic. She does offer a detailed reading of the traditional sources of information for John the Baptist (especially the Gospels and Josephus), but she dismisses many of the other contextual sources we have for a historical reconstruction of John the Baptist (such as the Dead Sea Scrolls). As such, some may find that Nir offers useful content for Advent and other places in the lectionary where John the Baptist's story is recounted, but such study would likely be more for personal edification than for ministry. Even in the case of the former, since her ideas fall outside of general scholarly consensus, the book should be read critically.

*David Creech
Concordia College, Moorhead*



God and Guns in America. By Michael W. Austin. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7643-0. xiii & 180 pages. Paper. \$21.99.

Michal Austin offers a sociological and biblical view of guns and violence in the United States and the passions that surround them. After giving a brief history of how owning a gun

has been a rite of passage for boys entering manhood, Austin explores some aspects of the Second Amendment. Writing from an "Evangelical" Christian perspective he says he grew up as a gun guy in a gun family. From that background, he tries to explore the arguments for and against guns, saying that "Thoughts and Prayers" are not enough in this country with so many people being killed by guns.

In the chapter, "Guns, Lies, and Bad Arguments," Austin helpfully pursues the problem of such statements as, "If guns are outlawed, then only outlaws will have guns," and "The only thing that stops a bad person with a gun is a good person with a gun." He questions, however, whether gun violence really is on the rise in America and attributes that view mostly to media coverage. (I prefer calling this country "The United States" rather than "America.") He does say that the number of mass shootings has increased and that schools should be safe. These views need to be stated more strongly given the epidemic of gun violence in this country, particularly in comparison to other countries.

In the second part of the book, Austin turns his attention to "Violence, Guns, and the Gospel," looking at pacifism and justified violence positions. He discusses peace building for the followers of Jesus. He pursues the question of bringing guns to church. This book could be helpful in conversing with those who have strong views about the right to carry guns any-where, including church. I would, however, make a stronger case for not bringing guns to church.

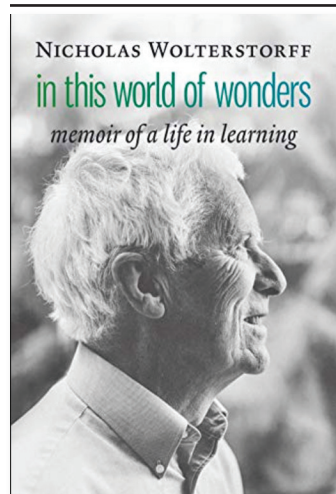
Missing from the book is a discussion of systemic racism and the inequities of justice. He writes that "gun violence is a problem for those living in areas where poverty is prevalent." Does that imply that those who have wealth do not own guns or contribute to gun violence?

The author recognizes the fallen condition of humankind but therefore seems to accept that violence will always be with us and that weapons will take on ever more lethal forms. Toward the end of the book Austin does seriously question Christian nationalism. He presents some remedies such as universal background checks and the "red flag" gun safety law. Austin



opens the way for seeking peace-building. Now it is up to the readers to take this Gospel action further than the author does.

*Norma Cook Everist,
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Wartburg Theological Seminary*



In This World of Wonders: Memoir of a Life in Learning. By

Nicholas Wolterstorff.
Grand Rapids:
Eerdmans, 2019. ISBN:
978-0-8028-7679-9.
Cloth. 318 pages.
\$25.00.

Born in 1932 at Bigelow, a small Dutch immigrant village near the Iowa border on the prairies of southwestern

Minnesota, and raised in a larger town, Edgerton, some forty miles north, Nicholas Wolterstorff begins his memoir with an appreciative, if unromanticized, tale of growing up into wonder and gratitude as his life unfolded as a pious child (a twin) in an extended Christian Reformed family, buffeted by the depression and the early death of his mother. Farmed out to work on his uncle's homestead as a hired hand, the young Nicholas attended high school at a nearby regional Christian academy just prior to leaving for his denomination's four-year undergraduate institution, Calvin College, located in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Here he proved to be a hard-working and high-achieving student, particularly in philosophy, a field for which Calvin was renowned. He immediately won a scholarship to graduate school in philosophy at Harvard, where he received his PhD only three years later.

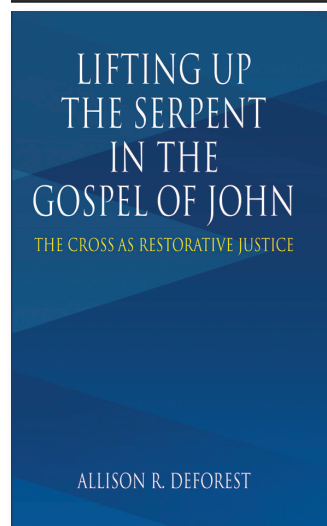
After a year's post-doctoral fellowship in Europe (1956-1957) with his wife, Claire, whom he met at Calvin, Wolterstorff accepted an appointment at Yale, from which he was lured back to Calvin where he spent the ensuing thirty years. In the late eighties, he returned to Yale as professor of philosophical theology, where he taught for more than a decade, retiring at the age of 70 to the much-loved home, which he and Claire built for their family of five children in Grand Rapids. This, of course, marks only the major geographical stations in Wolterstorff's biography, which also included various stints as visiting professor and lecturer. With his extensive list of publications, awards, and offices in professional associations, his has been a highly honored and recognized academic career.

Of more significance, however, are several achievements that illustrate the diversity and range of Wolterstorff's accomplishments, all of which carefully set the context of his memoir with unusual modesty and yet evident pride. These

include his role, from early in his career, as a leader among the so-called "Christian Philosophy" movement; an early and ongoing interest in aesthetics, arts and crafts, and the philosophy of art; liturgy and music in worship; international movements for justice (Palestinian rights, anti-apartheid activities, and anti-war,) as well as the philosophy of justice; and personal involvement and leadership in developing a progressive congregation rooted in the relatively conservative Christian Reformed denomination.

Wolterstorff's memoir is best exemplified as an outstanding example of true family values, rooted in his own ordinary, rural upbringing and culminating in his searing, personal account of his own raw grief at the death of his son, Eric, in a climbing accident titled *Lament for a Son* (1987). Here the author of so many eloquent and elegant philosophical writings reveals himself as a heartsick father at a loss for words in a series of broken fragments, gathered up into a closing "Requiem" for his son that he and his wife commissioned and for which we wrote the psalmic libretto.

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Lifting Up the Serpent in the Gospel of John: The Cross as Restorative Justice. By Allison

DeForest. New Delhi, India: Christian World Imprints, 2020. ISBN: 978-9-3514-8482-0. ix & 199 pages. Cloth. \$35.00.

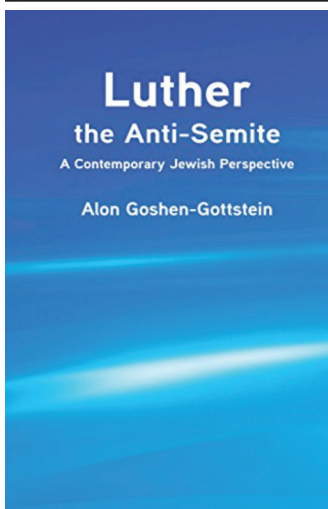
Why do many Christians support incarceration as the default approach to crime, no matter how minor

or non-violent? Why do so many Christians support Donald Trump's administration's policy of making the costs of illegal border crossing greater than its perceived benefits, even if it results in death? In her book, Allison deForest proposes the criminal justice systems Christians support correlate with their beliefs about "atonement" (see chs. 1 and 5). That case could be made with case studies of attitudes toward criminal justice in Christian communities and tracing the development of criminal justice systems and "atonement" theories. Instead, Dr. deForest goes at it by unpacking the cryptic echo of Numbers 21:4-9 in John 3:14-15 and the Johannine Gospel's main themes that support her reading of 3:14-15 (see ch. 2). She provides a rich description of the interplay of "Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness" and "the Son of Man [must] be lifted up," which exposes the significance the serpent image has in the Moses story and the Johannine text.



By focusing on the image of the serpent, Dr. deForest takes issue with the majority opinion in the history of exegesis, in two ways. First, the dominant view is that being “lifted up” is the *sole* focus of the echo to the Moses story. In the latter, the meaning of “*lifted up*” is limited to vertical physical space, whereas in the Johannine Gospel it includes but goes beyond that to include Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection/ascension as the “hour” when God would “glorify” him (12:23) and he would “glorify” God (17:1). So far, so good, for Dr. deForest. But second, she insists on the importance of the *serpent* image, which most interpreters deny. For her, the serpent is not a disposable detail; rather, as a disgusting, feared, and rejected creature, it is a perfect cipher for Jesus’ crucified body, which evokes disgust and fear (“someday it could be me”). Instead of inspiring belief in Jesus as “the Son of God,” his disgusting crucifixion results in his rejection as a mere human (“the son of the human?”). The negative image of the serpent creates a “crisis” for those whom the Johannine Gospel challenges to believe in him as “the Incarnate One” (deForest’s dynamic rendering of “the Son of Man”). In support of her view, Dr. deForest takes us on a tour of serpents in the Old Testament (see ch. 3) and of the serpent Moses “lifted up” in other Jewish and early Christian literature near the time of the Johannine Gospel (see ch. 4). Her close reading of John 3:14–15 and study of its biblical traditions lead to (support) the conclusion that “atonement” in the Johannine Gospel is not about retributive punishment, nor about substitutionary sacrifice, but about the restoration of individuals to their authentic self, of their community, and of their relationship with God. A criminal justice system consistent with this Christian view of “atonement,” therefore, should be *restorative*, not retributive. In this way, Allison deForest’s book illustrates how biblical exegesis can lead to a biblically informed “public theology” (see chs. 1 and 5)

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Wartburg Theological Seminary



Luther the Anti-Semite: A Contemporary Jewish Perspective. By Alon Goshen-Gottstein. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-5064-4582-3. Paper. xvi and 98 pages. \$14.00.

What can we do with Luther the Anti-Semite other than repudiate him? That has been done by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Evangelical

Lutheran Church in Canada, and other Lutheran bodies (not yet

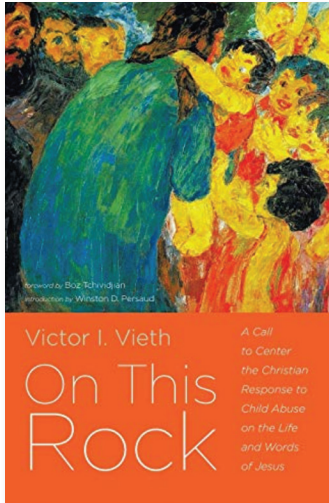
by the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland!). This is a book that could not have been written with integrity by a Lutheran. That is because the author, a Jewish leader in international interreligious dialogue, analyzes Luther’s anti-Jewish polemics to construct a mirror by which to reflect upon the dynamics of religious intolerance by representatives of other faith traditions, including by Jews. This is a daring and provocative proposal.

Goshen-Gottstein begins by examining Luther himself, his writings about and stance against the Jews. While referencing the now disproven distinction between the views of an early and late Luther, he concludes that Luther was consistent in always holding the Jewish people in need of conversion, even when that attitude turned violent in his late writings (most hatefully in *Against the Jews and their Lies* from 1543). From this examination of the historical Luther, the author constructs what he calls “the Luther model.” The elements of this model become the criteria by which to measure the possible limits of one’s own interreligious engagement today.

Among the factors demonstrated in the case of Luther are: 1) lack of contact and meaningful encounters with the religious other, 2) inaccurate knowledge of the other (rather than familiarity based on real representatives), 3) projections based on personal hurts and fears, 4) real theological and scriptural difference, 5) questioning the legitimacy of the other faith, 6) charging idolatry, 7) claiming certitude for one’s own position, 8) misreading the other’s history, 9) reacting out of a threat to one’s own identity, and 10) depicting the other in terms of apocalyptic dualism. What makes this model pointed is how it is used to probe Jewish, Christian, and Muslim relations today.

Interreligious encounter requires a “hermeneutic of love” (84) and “humility” in relation to truth claims about absolutes (86). “It seems Luther could not see the Jews, just as many contemporary Jews cannot see Christians. One has a hard time looking at oneself in a critical way. Recognizing that someone who has been considered an enemy actually manifests the same traits and brings together an entire set of characteristics that add up to an approach to the other that one can find within oneself is one way of gaining critical distance from oneself” (98). Goshen-Gottstein’s ability to provide constructive wisdom from the disaster of Luther’s negative model deserves our attention as an alternative approach—not only for interreligious relations but wherever difference gives rise to suspicion, hatred, and violence.

Craig L. Nesson
Wartburg Theological Seminary



On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus. By Victor I. Vieth. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-5326-4999-8. 80 pages. Paper. \$13.00.

Victor Vieth's *On This Rock* is a thought-provoking look at the ugly, long-standing, and difficult topic of

child abuse written from a theological perspective. Written by an award-winning professional who has been a prosecutor as well as director of the National Child Protection Training Center, this short book is a compelling call to take more seriously our collective responsibility as people of faith to safeguard children. Vieth moves the reader carefully and systematically through what the Bible says about children, how we have interpreted Jesus' words about children, and the Christian response to child abuse in our times.

Vieth illustrates how child abuse has been a significant example of the human condition of brokenness throughout history as he examines it in Graeco-Roman times, in New Testament Jewish culture, and today. Child abuse does lasting damage to the victim's self-awareness and his or her relationship to God. The value of children in contemporary society is reflected by their standing in the church. It is telling when church committees balk at spending money doing background checks on individuals who will be engaged in children's ministry, but it does not surprise us when we consider that training for child abuse prevention is not a standard part of seminary training.

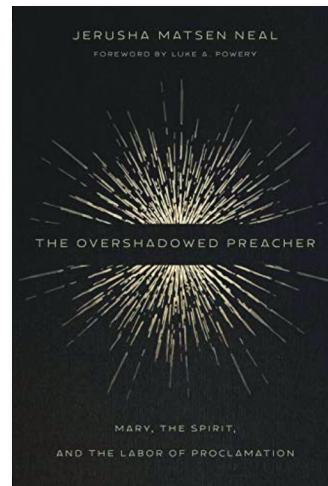
Vieth argues that Christians need to engage Jesus' theology of the child and adopt a proactive approach to the physical and spiritual needs of children. Jesus is vocal and counter-cultural about prioritizing children, and teaching adults to emulate the trusting and humble attitude that comes naturally to a child. Vieth points out that it is all too easy to loosely interpret verses about "little ones" to signify believers in general rather than children in particular, and this can deflect attention (and seriousness) away from abuses directed at children. Christians are called to address child abuse and to protect children from abuse of every kind, whether sexual offenses or physical beatings in the name of "disciplining," the latter being regarded as an inalienable parental right in some Christian groups.

Vieth mentions the scandal of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church that has made the headlines worldwide. Much of the reforms in this realm have been a result of lawsuits and

media, rather than theology. The book urges us to consider the difference we could make when we are motivated by the latter. What if we, the church, acted for children based on our understanding of what we believe and brought our faith concretely into the realm of child protection, care, and welfare?

Jo Kinnard

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Wartburg Theological Seminary graduate



The Overshadowed Preacher: Mary, the Spirit, and the Labor of Proclamation. By Jerusha Matsen Neal. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7653-9. 256 pages. Cloth. \$35.00.

This is a special book with an unusual and ambitious aim that it goes a long way in achieving: demonstrating how Luke's story of Mary's "overshadowing" by the Holy Spirit serves as a metaphor to assist preachers of the Gospel in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. The author, an American Baptist pastor now serving as a professor of homiletics at Duke Divinity School, is an accomplished teacher as well as writer, who employs numerous classroom anecdotes and examples from her students and other preachers. Her study reflects wide theological and biblical scholarship with a deep sensitivity for feminist and non-white ethnic viewpoints, and special affinity in drawing from her own intercultural experience as a onetime professor of preaching while serving as a missionary at a seminary in the Fiji Islands.

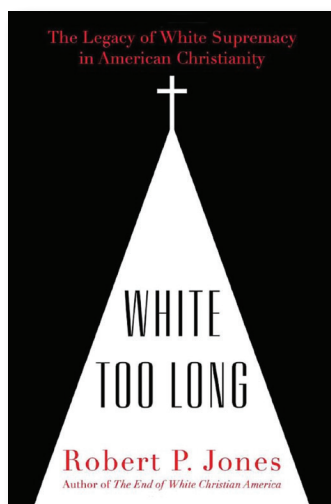
The genius of Neal's work is its imaginative pursuit of the annunciation to Mary and its aftermath, including her pregnancy, visit to Elizabeth, Magnificat, birth narrative, and motherhood of Jesus, as well as brief discussion of Catholic and Protestant Mariology. These serve as a metaphor for how the Spirit "overshadows" Word-bearing preachers in the performative act of proclaiming the Word in the fashion of Mary. The author uses three sermons from Acts, Luke's second volume, to assist in this task. Besides her close exegesis of the Annunciation text, the author delves into the three angelic commands in Luke 1:11, devoting a chapter each to "Conceiving: The Labor of Hospitality," "Bearing: The Labor of Dependency," and "Naming: The Labor of Discernment." Neal's intention is to "use the description of Mary's pregnancy . . . to describe the Spirit-filled labor of preachers, who bear Christ to the world" (213). It



is an audacious and exhaustive effort.

As one who has found the Marian texts of Luke and especially the Lucan canticles central to understanding the Gospel, I wish the author had spent more time exegeting the Magnificat. She gives the provocative practical advice to her fellow preachers to “find your Elizabeth,” which means “find the person who tells you that something leaps inside her when she sees the Word shining in your eyes” (177-178). But she underutilizes Luke’s use of Mary’s Song as a revolutionary lullaby that can be playfully imagined as the cradle song this humble *doule* (servant) sang to her baby Jesus, when rocking him to sleep to the topsy-turvy good news of the lowly lifted up and the powerful brought low, as would shape his life and ministry. A visual allusion might depict Sandro Botticelli’s stunningly whimsical oil painting of the Madonna and Child with the bambino Jesus guiding his mother’s hand in penning the words of the Magnificat.

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White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity. By Robert P. Jones. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-9821-2288-1. Ebook. Print length 310 pages. Kindle. \$14.99.

Robert Jones’ book *White Too Long* is an honest, engaging, and timely examination of how the white

church in America has played a key role in engendering the ideology of white supremacy. It is especially powerful coming from a Baptist theologian, pastor, and writer who has a handle on research methodology. Jones makes his case using recent surveys, history, and his personal experiences of growing up and training for a pastor role in his church. His evidence shows how white supremacy has come to be embedded in theology and other structures of the church among southern evangelicals and in other mainline white denominations elsewhere, including Catholics and Lutherans.

Jones urges white Christians to begin the hard work of recognizing and dismantling this long-standing and self-serving culture of “protection and purity” that is antithetical to the Gospel and has been used to justify bigotry, racial violence, and injustice. They must do so not just for the sake of equality and justice for their non-white brethren, but also because not doing anything calls into question their own integrity as Christians.

Jones believes that moving from denial to honest dialogue is the first step toward addressing the racial unrest and conflict that are tearing the fabric of this country. He describes the uncomfortable work of dealing with the past as critical to “healing and wholeness.”

Citing writers from both sides of the issue, such as Manly who defended slavery and the abolitionist Douglass, *White too Long* illustrates the hypocrisy in a white slave-owning Christian’s self-image as the innocent protector of his or her slaves, while acting in callous and mean ways towards them.

As a Lutheran, I was engaged by Jones’ deep pondering about how doctrines, such as biblical inerrancy and making faith be about a personal relationship with Jesus (enacted through altar calls), might be intentionally developed ways to swing the focus away from a corporate understanding of faith that would uphold social justice. Another shift Jones describes is the “premillennialist” theology that undermines efforts at social justice by declaring that injustice cannot be addressed because humans cannot reform the fallen world. Jones offers many other helpful insights.

After the Civil war ended slavery, Jones explains, the battle to sustain southern ideals shifted gears to adopt strategies of cultural engagement. He cites an earlier study identifying three theological approaches used by evangelicals, namely, freewill individualism, relationalism, and antistructuralism, that are used to attribute injustice to personal sinfulness rather than institutions. He sees such strategies in the playbooks of several white church groups.

In the Lutheran theology of the cross we have a powerfully transformative and healing faith perspective. Jones’ book is the outside voice that urges us to own the theology of the cross and ensure that it accessible to all—in the pews and in the world.

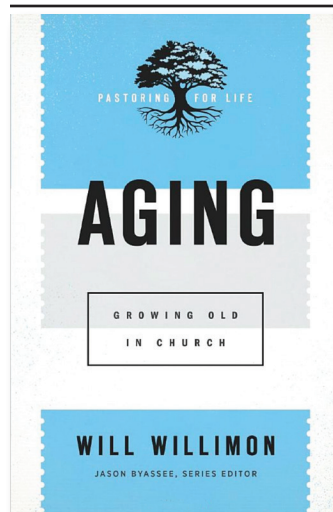
*Jo Kinnard
Pastor, Spirit of Peace Lutheran Church
McAllen, Texas
Wartburg Theological Seminary graduate*



Pastoring for Life:
Theological Wisdom for Ministering Well Series

Jason Byassee, editor of the series *Pastoring for Life: Theological Wisdom for Ministering Well*, writes that the series is intended not to “play small ball,” as we in the church so often end up doing, confining ourselves to “intramural matters while the church around us struggles, burns, ignores, or otherwise proceeds on its way.” The publisher has commissioned a new generation of works by noted practitioner-theologians on “Aging,” “Birth,” “Friendship,” and “Recovery” to demonstrate the Gospel’s relevance to renewal, not just of the church but of the “cosmos everything God bothered to create in the first place” (ix-x, *Recovery*).

The volumes in the series are reviewed by John Rollefson, retired ELCA pastor who has served urban and campus congregations in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor and Los Angeles. He currently lives in San Luis Obispo, California. Rollefson is author of the trilogy *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Years A, B, and C*.



Aging: Growing Old in Church. By Will Willimon. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-5409-6081-8, 178 pages. Paperback. \$21.99.

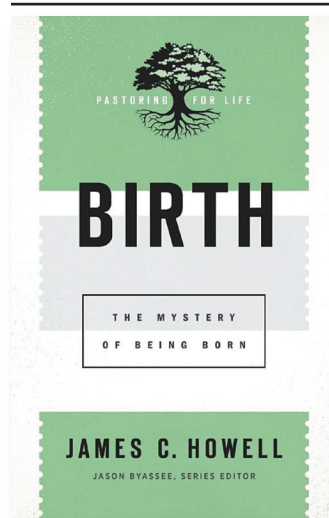
The prolific Methodist preacher, pastor, chaplain, bishop, and now Duke Divinity School professor has done it again! Blending together personal anecdotes, Scripture

(especially from Psalms), folk adage, expert opinion, and loads of good-humored Gospel common sense, Will Willimon has crafted a guide for aging Christians that meets the Goldilocks’ test of being “just right,” neither too long nor too short, too theoretical nor too conversational, too religious nor too secular. He sticks well to his subtitle’s task of paying attention throughout to the role of the church to accompany those in their final quartile in growing old, directing heart, mind, and soul, toward a good death.

Willimon is one who dares to trust that Christian faith is a resource for all of life, especially to face frankly and fearlessly the sure fact, denied in our U.S. culture, that we all shall die. Without denying that economic, health, and numerous social issues remain critical to our aging population, especially among

minority populations, he turns to how churches can respond to the pressing issues of aging, especially through imaginative recruitment and volunteer employment of retired people themselves, many of whom can benefit from meaningful involvement. Increasing length of life (at least until very recently) heightens the demographic stakes of viewing our aging population less as an impending crisis and more as resource. Quoting Rowen Greer: “the best care we can give the aged is, when possible, to use their gifts and to love them for what they can give. This means trying to avoid segregating the aged or at least seeking to mitigate the isolation as much as we can. We can strive to enable the aged to keep on serving, to be needed” (124).

The book closes with a highly effective chapter on “Ending in God,” which begins with a deft critique of the “bouncy, upbeat Celebration of Life” memorial service that is coming to replace the traditional funeral service. In this service, the congregation is encouraged to laugh about the foibles of the deceased rather than face the finitude of life, mourn the loss, and rejoice in the hope of eternal life. Willimon reminds us that the satanic promise to Adam and Eve in the Garden was “You will be like God,” the lie of immortality, and writes: “To Christians are given the resources to be honest about immortality” (157–158). He concludes with brief comments about the content of Christian belief regarding eschatology. He should be forgiven his breezy affirmation that in death God “reaches out to us in our mortality and takes us along for the ride” (159). John Calvin more nobly wrote: “Christ rose so that he might have us as companions in the life to come” (159). And to hear once more from Willimon: “The church at its best saves us from foolish lives” (103). Even with John Calvin as eternal company!



Birth: The Mystery of Being Born. By James C. Howell. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-5409-6083-2. 208 pages. Paper. \$21.99.

James C. Howell is no specialist on the topic of birth, except insofar as his own curiosity, life experience, and theological acumen have provided him with the requisite tools through his years as a Methodist pastor of a North Carolina congregation. He thereby writes an imaginative and biblically informed book on this odd topic worthy of comparison to others in the series, including “aging,” “friendship,” and “recovering.”

After chapters musing on our own biological origin in our mother’s womb and the “unchosenness” of it all, Howell suggests



playfully, with reference to Heidegger's philosophical word *Geworfenheit* (the "thrownness of existence"), as akin to thinking about our own birth as waking up in a "movie version of the Book of Ecclesiastes" (41), an idea I had never considered before.

The book turns next to biblical sources, using Mary and the birth narratives of Jesus to good effect, as a resource for considering the subject of birth. Here he strikes paydirt. Along the way Howell turns up numerous scripture passages (for example, Ps 139, Jer 1:4-10, Isa 42:14, Matt 24:8, John 16:21-22) which refer to birth, birth pangs and a mother's womb. It is striking to note how often these images related to birth are found throughout scripture and how male figures like Jesus and Paul had a special affinity for the metaphorical use of such images. Thankfully, the author also provides a "Scripture Index" to the book.

The book builds to an insightful conclusion in its final chapter, "You Must Be Born Again," in which the author performs a close and imaginative reading of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus and his utter incomprehension at Jesus' words that he must be "born again." Howell does a good job of putting such "born again" language in the long and deep context of American evangelicalism going back to George Whitfield (as well as the Puritan divines before him and John Wesley and the Methodists after him), while daring to critique the particular emotional and hyper-individualistic voluntarism this tradition still fosters.

What a breath of fresh air to be asked to consider being "born again" as a liberating image, rooted in scripture and in Jesus' own theological imagination, that invites us to consider our own rebirth into faith. The author treats baptism with special care in relation to the image of adoption as occurring at the Spirit's (perhaps our mid-wife?) caring hands. Along the way special sensitivity is shown to pastoral care in circumstances of infertility, miscarriage, abortion, infant death and disability, and maternal mental health, given frequent congregational inattention to such issues.

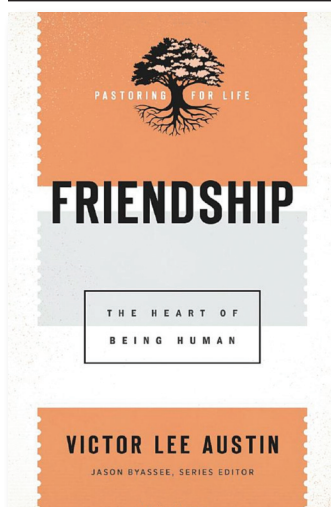
(93). On such excursions, classical authors such as Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero provide early points of interest, with Christian commentators such as Augustine, Aelred of Rievaulx, and Aquinas adding biblical and theological perspectives. Friendship is explored as a possible category to understand both intra-Trinitarian relationships as well as economic relationships between the persons of the Trinity and humankind.

Victor Lee Austin, an Episcopal priest and theologian, not surprisingly sees the doctrine of the incarnation as the chief warrant for finding friendship worthy of theological reflection. He holds Job and the Song of Solomon as his favorite biblical resources on the topic, followed by the second creation account in the second chapter of Genesis. John's Gospel, where Jesus elevates his disciples to the status of "friends" (15:12-17), is his favored text but he pays lesser attention to Jesus' actual relationship with his closest followers, for example, the "inner circle" of Peter, James, and John, the "Beloved disciple," or Mary Magdalene.

I have long been intrigued with Jesus' special friendship with Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, and wonder why the author ignores the story of Jesus weeping at news of Lazarus' death, where the bystanders remarked "See how he loved him" (John 11:35-36). The Greek word translated as "love" is actually the *philos*-related verb used to describe ordinary human friendship. If God's incarnation in Jesus truly marks friendship as "the heart of being human," then I think we are owed more reflection on "what a friend we have in Jesus" according to the scriptural accounts. Austin's view is that salvation itself "consummated in a universal friendship embracing" all God's friends (152).

Austin makes the case, and a relatively convincing one, for elevating the status of friendship above that of marriage in the church's concern, marriage being friendship, though of more limited scope. Curiously, he mounts a campaign to restore the universal significance of celibacy as a Christian social practice incumbent on all those not part of a marriage covenant. Without ever defining or describing what he means by "intimacy," which he holds as a central feature of friendship, he rues the degree to which sexuality has come to define so much of our society's expectations regarding it.

One of the best sections reviews a number of films and novels that explore friendship, including Sofia Coppola's "Lost in Translation," the *Harry Potter* series, *The Lord of the Rings*, and most interestingly, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Here the author broaches in an introductory way the pressing matter of how interracial friendships might contribute to racial justice issues in our country.

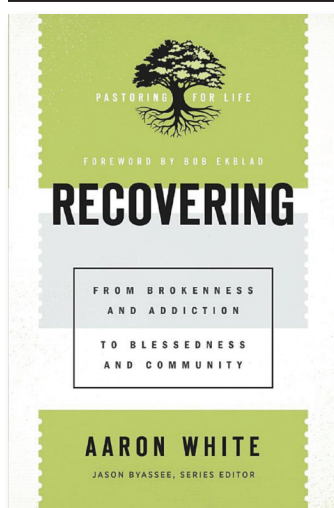


Friendship: The Heart of Being Human. By

Victor Lee Austin.
Grand Rapids: Baker,
2020. ISBN: 978-1-
5409-6317-8. 173 pages.
Paper. \$21.99.

This volume of the series takes up the often-neglected topic of friendship as a central feature of everyday Christian life. The author conducts a guided tour of "some of the smartest people

of human history about the important matter of friendship"



Recovering: From Brokenness and Addiction to Blessedness and Community. By Aaron White. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-5409-6318-5. 194 pages. Paper. \$21.99.

Aaron White writes from the unusual perspective of a long-time resident and pastor within Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES)

neighborhood, which has been described as “the worst postal code in Canada” and yet, as revealed through his true life stories, is the scene of many grisly yet redeeming encounters between the Gospel in action and its diverse local population, among those who claim the name Christian and those who do not. White's family background includes a dad and a grandpa who suffered from emotional and spiritual dislocation until converted by their spouses. The family became renowned within the local Salvation Army community, which White served for over twenty years before helping to found the “Beatitude Communities.” These are church-based recovery ministries that he continues to head from his home in the DTES neighborhood where he has resided and ministered for so long.

While the book is focused on recovery “from brokenness and addiction,” it takes a broad view of the kinds of behaviors these constitute from drug, alcohol, gambling, and sex addiction to pornography, racism, middle class consumerism, unjust policing, and governmental injustice. Even religion itself is named as potentially addictive in character; self-critique of the church's well-intentioned efforts to promote recovery is ever in view.

Providing the structure for this unusually honest and frank appraisal is the author's in-depth exegesis of Jesus' beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. Each chapter is organized as an ascending “ladder,” taking the reader ever deeper into the promised “kingdom of God” experienced as the fullness of recovery. The author readily admits how tensions can arise in Twelve Step circles when “someone assigns a name and concrete identity to his or her Higher Power,” when others indicate their preference for an unnamed Power “vague enough to include any meaning but soft enough to preclude any ethical requirements” (161). Despite such tensions, overall great appreciation is shown for the wisdom and utility of Twelve Step programs, and the need for congregations to take up a full-throated ministry of recovery well beyond just the use of a spare church room.



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