



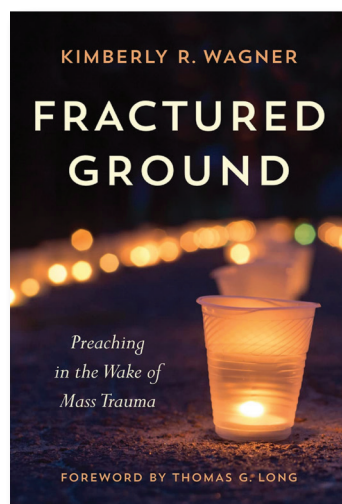
Book Reviews

January 2024

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

Review a book!

Currents in Theology and Mission is seeking to expand its number of regular book reviewers. If you have interest, please send name, contact information, and areas of primary interest to currents@lstc.edu.



Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma. By Kimberly R. Wagner.

Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-0-6642-6784-1. 139 pages. \$27.58.

Fractured Ground helps equip preachers to practice trauma-responsive preaching in the face of mass trauma, including human violence (e.g., mass

shootings, bombings), natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes, tornadoes), and public health crises (e.g., pandemics, water shortages). Chapter One lays the groundwork for this project by distinguishing trauma from a traumatic event and explaining that people's individual traumatic responses can vary significantly in strength, how they present themselves, and how long they last, extending even to subsequent generations if the trauma is "untreated or uncared for" (15). Wagner also describes how communal trauma often draws people in similar proximity to the traumatic event together while creating or exacerbating divisions from those whose proximity differed.

Chapter Two provides an overview of theological questions that arise during a mass traumatic event (e.g., Where is God?) in recognition that preachers are the ones faced with these questions. Moreover, preachers are not always able to follow the common advice to "preach from scars and not wounds" as they speak to these questions because they are usually a part of the community that has been traumatized. Wagner urges preachers to call upon mental health professionals for themselves and their communities.

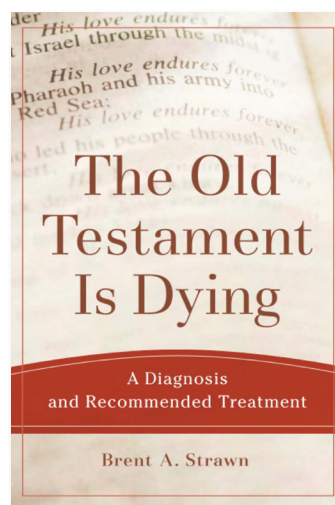
Chapter Three invites preachers, in the immediate aftermath of mass trauma, to resist preaching in the narrative fashion many of us learned in seminary, moving neatly and completely from Good Friday to Easter each week. Traumatized individuals

experience what Wagner names "narrative fracture," an experience that sits outside or exceeds what the narratives on which they have built their lives can hold. A sermon that moves from trouble to resolution in 15 minutes or less will be unhelpful at best and harmful at worst. Instead, she suggests in Chapter Four that preachers preach within the tension of Holy Saturday, boldly naming the suffering and loss while also "pointing toward the eschatological promises of God" (76). She warns against the tendency to lean too heavily toward either suffering that forgets the promises of God or hope and resurrection that pushes aside the reality of the present suffering. Chapter Five offers two sermon forms to support narrative fracture not only in what is said but in how it is said.

Chapter Six argues that a sermon can be comforting and include a call to action; the preacher does not have to choose. Wagner supports her argument by pointing to the genre of lament in scripture, especially prevalent in the Psalms. Chapter Seven encourages preachers to be not just trauma-responsive following a particular event but trauma-aware at all times, knowing both that communal trauma has come before and will come again and that congregants are often experiencing individual traumas.

Wagner offers an accessible and helpful book for preachers who struggle to speak in the face of yet another communal crisis in the United States. While *Fractured Ground* is especially helpful for preachers who are unfamiliar with trauma theory, much of Wagner's guidance is helpful to keep in mind each and every Sunday.

Samantha Gilmore
Wartburg Theological Seminary
Dubuque, Iowa



The Old Testament Is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment. By Brent A. Strawn.

Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017. Xxvi and 310 pages. Paper. \$34.00.

The concern for the future of the Old Testament has brought Brent A. Strawn to re-imagine its relevance. In this monograph, Strawn provides a critical

analysis of the use of the Old Testament in North America, specifically the reality of ministerial practices where the Old Testament is rarely used. For Strawn, this is a problem. This reality leads him to argue that the Old Testament is dying. Strawn presents his argument in three parts, with each part consisting of three chapters.

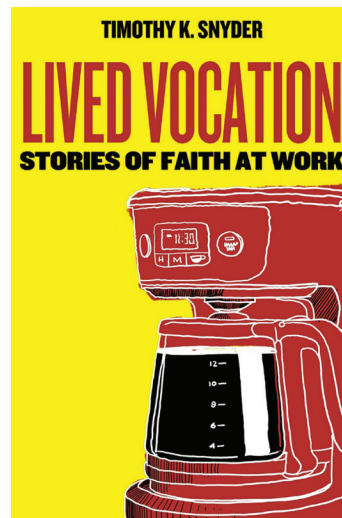


In Part One, Strawn analogizes the Old Testament as a language (chs. 1-3). This analogy, however, brings him to the idea that the Old Testament is dying. Strawn observes how in worship the Old Testament is often only read by an elder, and the majority of the sermon concerns itself with the New Testament. This gives the impression that understanding the New Testament is more important than the Old Testament. These circumstances have made the Old Testament cease “to function in healthy ways in their lives as sacred, authoritative, canonical literature” (5). In Part Two, Strawn, moreover, mentions three movements that diminish the value of the Old Testament (chs. 4-6). The movements are the New Atheism, Marcionism, and “Happiologists.”

In the final part, Strawn suggests some solutions to preserve the language, so to speak, that is the Old Testament. For Strawn, the Old Testament (written in Hebrew) should be made as a second tongue, meaning people should make engagement with it a regular activity, such as discussing it regularly (165). Furthermore, Strawn portrays the concept of Deuteronomy as another solution. From his point of view, Deuteronomy is an excellent book to consider for preserving the language. Two reasons for him are its ubiquity (195) and how it is aimed at the whole community of Israel, as a group and as individuals (197). Eventually, Strawn presents four considerations and one caution on how to care for and preserve the language (of the Old Testament). First, the most basic (and obvious) recommendation is regular use; second, the need for adequate linguistic training; third, intentionally in language practice and language learning; fourth, on creating bilinguals.

Overall, Strawn’s argument is solid and emphasizes the analogy to understand the Old Testament as a language. As a language, it is dying. In fact, the lack of attention and value on the Old Testament puts the Old Testament in dying circumstances. Christianity probably is not going to die yet, but the meaning of the text could change from what is in the original languages. This is what Strawn calls Pidginization and Creolization. I highly appreciate what Strawn suggests in his treatments for this problem, especially for getting the attention of the pastors in the congregations. His encouragement to use the Old Testament routinely and make it a habit is tremendous. Ultimately, I highly recommend this book for pastors and laity alike, to read for the sake of re-realizing how important the Old Testament is.

Toqu Sihite
Boston University
Boston, Maine



Lived Vocation: Stories of Faith at Work. By Timothy K. Snyder.

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2023.
ISBN: 978-1-5064-8134-0. Paper.
xix and 197 pages. \$21.99.

This is a fascinating study based on interviews with people in various forms of employment about how they interpret their work from a faith perspective. Hearing their stories about work experiences and career changes

provides qualitative data for analysis and conclusions about intersections with Christian faith. The eighteen subjects, all members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, reflect the demographics of the denomination both economically and ethnically (all were of European descent).

Snyder does a marvelous job of presenting the personal narratives of the participants about their work experiences. He weaves these stories with reflections from his own life about the challenges and fulfillment of work in a variety of settings and circumstances. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the history of work as a prelude to introducing the backgrounds of the subjects.

Chapter 2 introduces a major research question about whether these Lutherans would naturally refer to what Snyder calls “the vocational script.” By this he means the Reformation theme of work as a “calling.”

Since at least the early twentieth century, theologians and other religious leaders have used our theologies of vocation in a prescriptive way. While Luther pointed to the *potential* of all work to be a calling, theologians and religious leaders today often talk and write about vocation in a way that suggests all workers *should* see their work as a calling. We’ve turned the vocational script into our prescription for meaning making (33).

While some of the participants did refer to their work as a calling, many did not, leading to the conclusion that “the vocational script is just one of many stories ordinary workers tell themselves and others about the meaning of their work” (32). Instead, Snyder discovered many “improvised stories with all their twists and turns” that “turns over the prescriptive vocational script” (39).

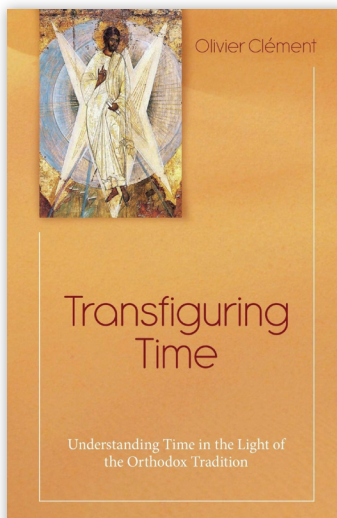
Chapter 3 organizes material that depicts the beginnings of their working lives as “origin stories.” This chapter includes a poignant description of what David Graeber called “bullshit jobs” that turn workers into flunkies, goons, duct tapers, box tickers, or taskmasters (52-53). In the contemporary work environment, this may be the most difficult challenge facing any vocational script, when work is inherently degrading or bereft of a fulfilling purpose.



Chapter 4 examines work as “toil” with stories about the difficulties and challenges of work, for example, unethical work expectations, micromanaging, verbal abuse, loneliness, and retaliation. Chapter 5 draws conclusions from the diverse stories of participants about the meaning and purpose of their work. One of the chief findings is the extent to which meaning at work involves the quality of relationships, “because it was through those relationships that they experienced care and support” (141). In addition to compensation and benefits, work was considered meaningful because of “the quality of the work,” “the relationships they had through work,” and “the opportunities they were given or that they gave to others” (146).

Based on this research, I draw three conclusions. First, there is a crisis in our capitalist economic system that deprives many workers of alignment between their gifts and purposeful labor. This contributes to ennui and even despair about the meaning of work. Second, congregations need to be more intentional about engaging members in conversations about their work. Is it only the case that the vocational script of understanding work as a calling is not adequate, or may it also be the case that churches are failing to engage members at all about the relationship between faith and their work? I wonder about a gap between the relative infrequency of the vocational script and what is being taught in the church. Third, the degree to which meaning at work involves relationships and serving the needs of others remains consistent with the heart of Lutheran ethics: freedom to serve neighbors.

Craig L. Nessian
Wartburg Theological Seminary
Dubuque, Iowa



***Transfiguring Time:
Understanding Time
in the Light of the
Orthodox Tradition.***

By Olivier Clément.
Translated by Jeremy N.
Ingpen.

Hyde Park, New York: New City
Press, 2019. Original French
version, 1959. ISBN: 978-1-5654-
8680-5. Paper. 174 pages. \$16.95.

Readers may recall
another work of more
than seventy years ago that

was notable for its treatment of time from a religious/cosmological perspective: *Christ and Time* (1951) by Oscar Cullmann. This book, originally published in French in 1959 as *Tranfigurer le Temps*, by the lay Orthodox scholar Olivier Clément, has taken sixty years to find its way to an English translation. The author cites Cullmann’s work both approvingly and critically, suggesting that Cullmann “stumbled into contradicting both the Bible

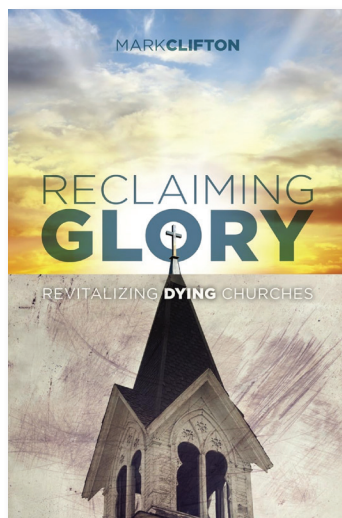
and himself” by suggesting that “time, in its indefinite duration, begins with God” (44-45), rather than being the eternal God’s own creation. This insight leads Clément to a detailed Orthodox theological analysis of time which sometimes departs from western understandings, including both Roman Catholic and Protestant views.

Clément begins Part I “Cyclical Time” with an impressive introduction to the views of time evidenced in non-biblical religions, which he calls “cosmic religions,” that are animated by a “nostalgia for paradise” to which they long to return in a pattern of cyclical repetition. Here he evidences wide-ranging knowledge from the Eleusinian mysteries of ancient Greece to various Hindu and Buddhist traditions with which he seeks to find connections with his Orthodox view of time. He nonetheless concludes: “And so the non-Christian East has not yet discovered the full meaning of time” (42).

In Part II “God and Time,” our author engages in a constructive effort to unpack an Orthodox understanding of time by taking the reader on a whirlwind tour of the Bible, beginning with the “Linear Time of the Old Covenant” and concluding with “The Economy of the Son.” This section recounts the story of the eternal entering into human history of the human participant named Jesus, whose cross and resurrection lead to God’s gift of the Spirit and breathing into being the Church, which Clément declares as “the center of human time” (97).

Part III “The Economy of the Holy Spirit and Deified Time” provides the author opportunity to develop the implications of the Orthodox understanding of time in this age of the Church. I found this the least successful of Clément’s sections, however illuminating, due to an Orthodox self-assurance that can strike one as off-putting and immune to self-criticism. It is striking how he cites the second century Epistle to Diognetus: “Christians live each in their own country as if they were resident aliens” (141). He then goes on to confess unequivocally (in the face of Orthodoxy’s painful history of contesting with the state): “Christ, not Caesar, is the Kyrios, the Lord of history” (143).

John Rollefson
Retired ELCA Pastor
San Luis Obispo, California



***Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches.* By Mark Clifton.**

Brentwood, Tennessee: B&H Publishing, 2023. ISBN: 978-1-0877-8197-6. Paper. 192 pages. \$14.99.

Mark Clifton's thesis in *Reclaiming Glory* is simply that "God's glory must compel us to replant the dying churches that surround us in North America" (37). God's glory is central to everything the author writes. Churches were created for God's glory (17), leading pastors to undertake the hard work of replanting dying churches. In this way, disciples make much of Jesus.

Clifton delves into theoretical subject matter such as diagnosing and breathing new life into dying churches before turning his attention to a more practical subject; pathways for church replanting, wherein he details four methodologies for replanting: Giving the building to a church plant, sharing the building with a church plant, merging with a church plant, and replanting from within. All four methodologies are viable. Clifton recognizes each congregation will approach replanting differently because each church is unique in its ministry story.

Clifton delves into theoretical subject matter such as diagnosing and breathing new life into dying churches before turning his attention to a more practical subject; pathways for church replanting, wherein he details four methodologies for replanting: Giving the building to a church plant, sharing the building with a church plant, merging with a church plant, and replanting from within. All four methodologies are viable. Clifton recognizes each congregation will approach replanting differently because each church is unique in its ministry story.

What makes *Reclaiming Glory* such a valuable resource is that the process Clifton outlines in chapter four has already been proven to be enormously effective. Clifton's process is radical in its simplicity. He calls on pastors to pray without ceasing, love the remaining members, exegete the community, focus on reaching young men, and make disciples who make disciples (xiv). This is not so much Clifton's plan, as it is God's. The Lord calls God's people to pray, love one another, understand the community, reach, and develop young leaders, and make disciples. These biblical truths do not change and, because they have been handed down by God, will not fail.

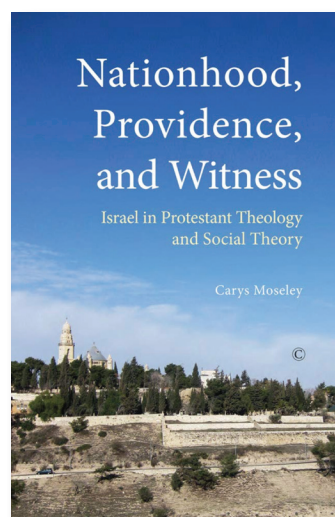
Chapter five is devoted to church testimonials of transformation. Each diverse church enters revitalization differently. The stories of transformation encourage pastors to consider revitalization a necessity in church life while asking questions of their ministry such as, "What areas need revitalization, and how is it accomplished?" Clifton phrases it this way, "A healthy church regularly evaluates their ministry footprint in the community" (113).

What differentiates Clifton from other authors in this arena is his first-hand experience in church revitalization. Over many decades God has used Clifton to revitalize small congregations that have lost focus, become discouraged, and faced hardship. This is the overriding strength of *Reclaiming Glory*. Because of his depth of experience, the reader trusts Clifton to outline the char-

acteristics of a church planter while he reminds church leaders, "You can't replant your church" (151), it is a work of God. Clifton's invitation to count the cost of replanting is a sober reminder that church revitalization will face resistance and attack. The pastor must be prepared to face resistance from the congregation, the loss of some long-term friendships, and Satanic attacks.

Although Clifton's focus on normative-sized congregations is welcome, he misses an opportunity to communicate the need for revitalization in larger churches. Herein lies the only weakness of the book. While a vast majority of congregations of 100 members or fewer are in need, revitalization is beneficial for congregations of every size. Neither the size of the congregation nor the budget is necessarily indicative of a church's health.

*Robert Shepherd, Pastor
New Heritage Baptist Church
Sherman, Texas*



Nationhood, Providence, and Witness: Israel in Modern Theology and Social Theory.

By Carys Moseley.

Cambridge: James Clarke and Company, 2013. ISBN:978-0-2271-7397-8. Paper. 300 pages. \$45.00.

This book has many themes. The central concern is how "nationhood" is understood theologically and sociologically, including people without a state to call their own (such as the Welsh, whom the author claims as her own). The modern state of Israel serves as a prime example of a long-time stateless people spread among the nations of the world. As Israel now claims their own "homeland," it is the biblical claim of the Jews to be a nation called by God's "Providence," as the title indicates, with a special destiny among all the nations of the earth that merits the author's special concern.

Moseley decries the widespread condemnation of "nationalism" she detects among many of her academic—and especially theological—colleagues who to her seem biased in favor of larger nation states and empires. Several chapters of the work dwell on a close analysis of the writings of theologians and philosophers with whom she takes issue, like her fellow Brits, John Milbank and Rowan Williams, whom she tars with the brush of high Anglicanism.

The author especially deplores Williams who defected from his own Welsh-speaking Presbyterian roots to climb the ladder of the Anglican hierarchy to become Archbishop of Canterbury and the nominal head of global Anglicanism. This eminent theo-

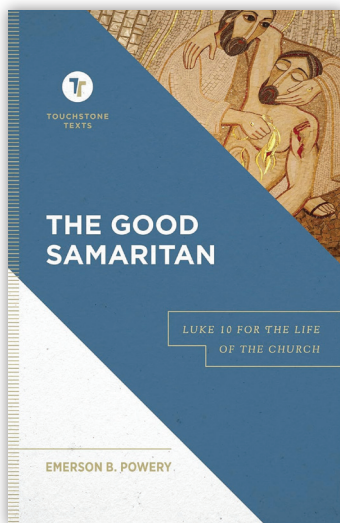


logian had the responsibility to preside over a global church amid a time of serious political and theological conflict and where, to the author's mind, he evinced a major failure to lead due to his inadequate understanding of the nature of nationhood, especially Israel's theological and political situation as a freshly minted nation state gathered in the wake of the Nazi holocaust of the Jewish people.

Oddly, a preoccupation with what she claims to be Williams' (among others) reliance on the "hermetic" political philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel seems to preoccupy the author. Her theological allies are of a Reformed/Calvinist stripe, including Reinhold Niebuhr, Abraham Kuyper, and especially Karl Barth. Moseley sees Barth as a close ally with his understanding of nationhood and the State of Israel.

Moseley's work is well-researched and documented, if sometimes laboriously argued with some stereotyping of her opponents' positions. Her biases are on full display—anti-Anglican, pro-Welsh Protestant, pro-State of Israel, anti-Hegelian—which add up to a tendentious and dogged account.

John Rollefson
Retired ELCA pastor
San Luis Obispo, California



***The Good Samaritan:
Luke 10 for the Life
of the Church.*** By
Emerson B. Powery.

Grand Rapids: Baker, 2022. ISBN: 978-1-5409-6066-5. vii & 176 pages. Cloth. \$24.99.

The parable often called "The Good Samaritan" is well known in Christian and non-Christian circles alike. *The Good Samaritan: Luke 10 for the Life of the Church* by Emerson Powery

focuses on this parable and its interpretations throughout the Christian tradition. Powery engages with individuals of the past, such as Augustine, Frederick Douglass, Harriot Jacobs, Howard Thurman, Toni Morrison, and Desmond Tutu, groups such as the Amish and Solentiname communities, and events such as the tragedy at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which followed the end of South African apartheid. In four chapters and a very brief pre-ample and conclusion, this book takes the reader on a journey of exploration and meaning concerning biblical interpretation in general and this parable of Jesus in particular.

The first two chapters center on individuals and groups. The lawyer's question to Jesus, which commences the original parable, guides the way: "Who is my neighbor?" Calling upon

Frederick Douglass, Powery writes about doing theology from below and how one interprets the Bible. Looking to Toni Morrison and her novel, *A Mercy*, Powery reveals how sometimes Jesus' stories do not have clean and complete endings, which is similar to African American spirituals. Powery contemplates the contemporary calamities of what happened at Nickel Mines, at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, and in South African apartheid as well as the aftermaths of these events and how they interact with this Luke 10 parable.

Powery shows by looking at various interpretations of the parable that one's context determines what one might initially see. This includes Augustine's context and hermeneutic, as well as his interpretation of this Good Samaritan parable. The North African bishop was more concerned with the interpreter's desire for love than literal or allegorical interpretive methods. Howard Thurman is also found under the analytical microscope. His context within the Civil Rights movement provides perspective on his and other readings of the text, like Martin Luther King Jr.'s. For Thurman, the parable explores how one lives in the tensions between groups of people and individuals based on signifiers such as race or ethnicity. The Solentiname Nicaraguan community embodies a way of group interpretation through dialogue. As an example, Powery uses their discussion of the Good Samaritan, which directly connects to their political situation. Additionally, Harriet Jacobs becomes a point of focus, who re-interprets the parable from her context, understanding the Samaritan to be a slave. Jacobs also inspects the different victims one can see in the story. Through all these, the reader is invited to observe how this Samaritan's act of kindness has influenced the world throughout the past 2000 years and how distinct settings directly affect how people interpret, understand, and come to conclusions about a text.

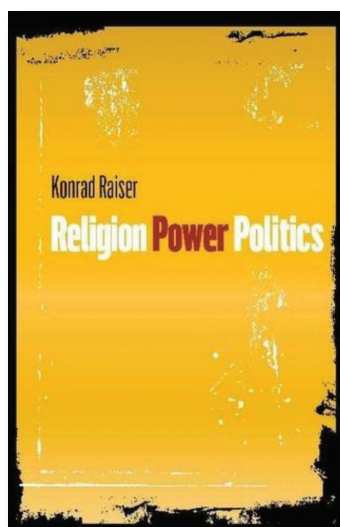
Chapter 3, taking a more historical-critical approach, deals with interpreting the parable with a plethora of questions in mind. These include questions of authorial context, surrounding pericopes and stories within Luke, socio-political settings, race and ethnicity, and with whom the reader/hearer should identify. The final chapter expresses how Luke 10 is a creative reminder of how the body matters. Writing in light of the Black Lives Matter movement, Powery suggests a related question regarding the parable: "Do Samaritan lives matter?" Taken from John Lewis and inspired by this parable of surprising mercy, Powery asks if the church has engaged in good trouble. How does reading, hearing, and interpreting this parable impact and inspire us? To where and what are we called after letting this story of Jesus sink deep into our beings?

A guiding question in this book is the same question Jesus asks the lawyer before pronouncing the parable: "How do you read?" How do we read this text? How does this text shape us? Who is my neighbor? What does it mean to be a neighbor? What does neighborliness look like in today's context? As Powery shows, our worldview and our communal biblical readings are connected and correlated.



The Good Samaritan: Luke 10 for the Life of the Church will be eye-opening and insightful to a great swath of people. While Powery is well known for homiletics, this book focuses less on preaching and more on interpretation. It is well-balanced in terms of accessibility and certainly scholarly grounding. The title accurately describes it: it is indeed a book for the church. By excellently engaging this parable's hermeneutical history, this book brings to light readings and interpretations many might not have yet encountered. Both those with and without theological training will find something new to chew on as they prow through these pages that probe this particularly popular parable.

Jackson Reynolds
Princeton Theological Seminary
Princeton, New Jersey



Religion, Power, Politics. By Konrad Raiser. Translated from the German by Stephen Brown.

Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2013.
ISBN: 978-2-8254-1599-3. Paper.
168 pages. \$20.00.

This thin volume by the former general secretary of the World Council of Churches is a well-researched study of the changing relationship between religion and politics on the global scene. As his chief question, he wishes to help the reader ponder: “Do religions have a specific contribution to make in the quest for a new world order? Or do religions need to be kept as far as possible from efforts to reshape international relations because of their conflicts?” (119).

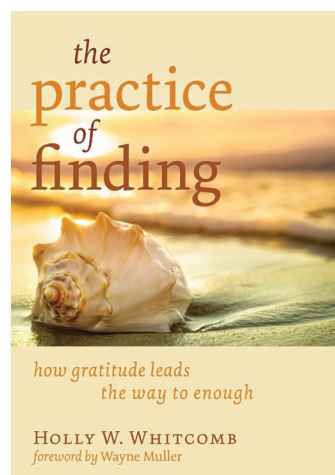
From a Western perspective, the modern assumption that secularization could be depended upon to make religion a decreasingly significant actor in world affairs simply has proven false. This is the case not only in postcolonial nations across the globe but as migration carries refugees from their countries of origin to Europe and North America for resettlement.

Especially in a resurgent Islam, as Raiser carefully shows, various forms of religion have asserted themselves as actors in the political realm, not only where “fundamentalist” forms of Islam, but also of Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism have found political expression. The author traces the origins of fundamentalism among American Protestants to its origins in American Evangelical revivalism, (although there are inaccurate details linking Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield with “the great revival movement of the 1830s” and misidentifying Charles Finney as a “Methodist preacher”).

Raiser charts the rise of recent efforts (including by the World Council of Churches) to stimulate dialogue among the world's religions and international organizations, such as the United Nations, for understanding one another's perspectives, and for moving toward consensus and beyond violence on critically divisive political issues. One would like to know the book's implications for recent events, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the subsequent reinvigorating of NATO, the withdrawal of the U.S.-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the MAGA movement in the U.S. with its alliance with much of conservative evangelicalism.

The book serves as a helpful “complexifier” in deepening understandings of how “church/state” issues, especially as seen in the American context, are much deeper and more complicated when understood in the context of religions that are culturally rooted in a self-conscious peoplehood that is deeper than state or national identity. This is an important stimulus to further thinking on issues that promise to long be with us.

John Rollefson
Retired ELCA Pastor
San Luis Obispo, California



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

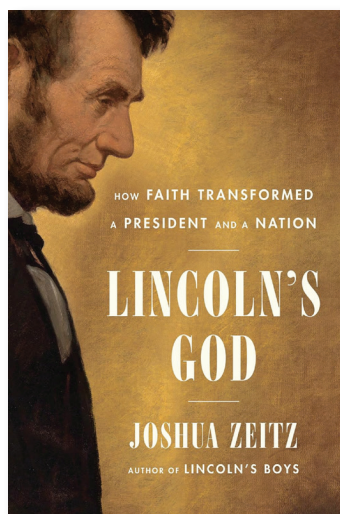


summarizes the book's message. On a sabbatical trip, my wife and I were taking a walk in the German city of Weimar. When we rounded a corner, our eyes were drawn to some decorous graffiti painted on the upper story of a building: "Die Welt ist voll alltäglicher Wunder," which means "The world is full 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.

At the conclusion of each chapter, the author helpfully provides 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
San Luis Obispo, California



Lincoln's God: How Faith Transformed a President and a Nation. By Joshua Zeitz.

New York: Viking, 2023. ISBN: 978-1-9848-8221-9. 313 pages. Cloth. \$30.00.

In *Lincoln's God*, Joshua Zeitz examines the role of religion in aiding the sixteenth president in making sense of personal tragedies and the mass misery of the

Civil War. Zeitz also details the religious landscape of America prior to, during, and after the war and discusses how the conflict influenced Americans' views of God and eternity.

Lincoln's understanding of God was complex. As a young man, he appeared to believe in a creator simply because, in the words of a friend, the "order and harmony" of creation meant it would be "more miraculous" for the world to have come about by chance. Although Lincoln did not profess a belief in Christ's divinity, neither could he "disprove the possibility either" (68).

In the White House, Zeitz contends Lincoln came to believe he had been "chosen to play a leading role in a history whose end was preordained" and that this belief allowed him to "weather the war's many reversals, defeats, and frustrations" (174). The belief that God was ultimately in control gave Lincoln the "strength required to make dreadful decisions in the most impossible of circumstances" (174).

In contrast to many ministers of the North and South, Lincoln did not presume that God was taking a side in the conflict. Instead, Lincoln's second inaugural address conveyed his belief that slavery was a sin and that both sides had caused the war by "sustaining its cruelty and injustice over so many generations" (237). As a result of this sin, both sides suffered "[d]eath, destruction, and bereavement" (237). Zeitz contends that no president had "so openly infused a public speech with religious sentiment and phrasing" (238). Frederick Douglas approved of the speech, noting it was "more like a sermon than a state paper" (238).

In addition to its impact on Lincoln's views of God, the war also influenced American religion. Many northern clergy shifted from an emphasis on the New Testament's message of love and mercy to the prophetic messages of the Hebrew Bible as they preached God's judgment on the rebellious slaveholders of the South. Prior to the war, Americans viewed heaven in celestial terms where God was to be worshiped and earthly cares vanished. As a result of widespread death and separation from loved ones, Americans "recast their conception of heaven as a replica of the life they enjoyed on earth" where they would be reunited with their loved ones. As for the soldiers themselves, "Christianity proved a powerful lens for...reconciling death—and their hand in inflicting it—on a scale no American had seen then or has seen since" (192).

Christian themes also played a role in how Northern Americans made sense of the president's assassination. Since the murder took place on Good Friday, many Americans saw a "terrible religious import, as though Lincoln, like Christ before him, had been sacrificed for the atonement of a sinful nation" (241). *Lincoln's God* is a richly detailed, thought-provoking narrative of the influence of religion on a leader, the leader's invocation of religion to mobilize a nation, and the role of faith in the lives of average citizens in coping with widescale death and suffering. It would be an excellent selection for a book club discussion.

Victor I. Vieth
Center for Faith & Child Protection
Zero Abuse Project and Adjunct Instructor
Wartburg Theological Seminary
Dubuque, Iowa