
Walter Brueggemann’s Divine Presence amid Violence is one among many recent studies of the Old Testament that observe God’s inextricable connection to violence and war. With remarkable clarity, Brueggemann engages Scripture relevant to our own contemporary theological discussions. This curious little title suggests a difficult question: What are we to do with all the unspeakable human violence and bloodshed in the Old Testament that is done in the name of God? These sixty-odd pages provide a classic example of Walter Brueggemann’s theological agenda—if you’ve read him before, you’ll know what to expect: Brueggemann’s signature emphasis on the central importance of the paradigmatic salvific and liberating activity of Yahweh over against violent royal domination systems. Exodus theology is the lifeblood that inundates every page.

The reader must keep in mind that the work in this book is not intended to be an exhaustive study—it would be impossible even to mitigate the problems of violence in the book of Joshua in sixty-some pages. Instead, Brueggemann provides the reader with a concise midrash on divine presence and its connection to violence in Josh 11 that is both a practical and accessible pastoral offering, appropriate for layperson and clergy alike. His writing draws from a considerable knowledge of Scripture. Moreover, it is informed by a pantheon of scholars, old and new, rendering a considerable bibliography for any aspirant to the understanding of biblical warfare. Certainly, this book is an excellent starting place for those who wish to join the ongoing conversation about war, the Bible, and the church today.

Brueggemann’s work here is a long overdue departure from countless classic pastoral treatments of the connection of the divine and violence, most painfully expressed in apologia and pleading on the behalf of Scripture, God, and country. Furthermore, it is a refreshing change from the typical treatment of Scripture in popular biblical scholarship—the reader is not nettled with bothersome text-critical matters, but is troubled instead by the intense reality of horse and driver and Solomonic economics, as immediate and living as our own communities. For Brueggemann, Scripture portrays a reality that replays itself over and over in the world today. Consequently, Brueggemann’s work is never a disconnected autopsy on a “dead letter,” but is always a conversation with the living, breathing word of God. He therefore prays a desperate prayer concerning our reading and understanding of Josh 11: “We must read the narrative as disclosure ‘from the other side’ within communities of domination” (64). Readers of this book will find themselves to be deeply engrossed and challenged by this exercise.

The problems of divine permission and violence in texts such as Joshua are traditionally dealt with by transposing the political-historical violence into “ontological violence”—customarily expressed as “God’s struggle with death.” This “bourgeois construction,” however, is not characteristic of Brueggemann’s writing. The struggle here is not between “God and death” but “Yahweh and empire.” The message couldn’t be clearer—our world is the same as the world disclosed within this diffi-
cult Scripture, and we are playing out the same drama as the ancient domination systems of the Bible. To miss this element is to distort biblical faith into a benign, innocuous affair. Here Brueggemann does no such thing. His task is not to jettison the problems of violence that are aroused by the text, or to exonerate God, but to offer an appropriate, reasonable, and theo-political lens for the difficult enterprise of understanding biblical violence and its connection to the divine. If you are looking for an apologia for “American empire,” you must look elsewhere. Brueggemann does not offer exoner-ation for empire, but instead invites us to see our present society of militarism in the royal domination systems of the Bible: “The powerful lineage of Pharaoh, Sisera, Nebuchad-nezzar never learns in time. But the text persists and is always offered again” (64).

Our world today, not unlike the world disclosed in Scripture, cries out for liberation. Brueggemann refuses to let those cries fall on deaf ears: “Generation after generation, the strange turn of the Exodus is reenacted with new characters, but each time on behalf of helpless Israel” (48). I recommend that you read this book with Scripture in one hand and a newspaper in the other. You may be left without words, but Brueggemann will surely place some upon your lips: “We are more fully embedded in communities of horses and chariots, more fully committed to domination” (64).

Brueggemann’s work, like the book of Joshua, “is a disclosure of hope to those embedded in reliance on horses and chariots, a warning that all such arms cannot secure against God’s force for life” (64). The need for the liberation of helpless “Israel” persists in the world today, and Brueggemann is one liberating voice that refuses to surrender to the crushing silence of Western passivity.

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These two books, on Epaphras and Apollos by Michael Trainor and Patrick Hartin, respectively, are part of a series, Paul’s Social Network, edited by Bruce Malina. The series uses social relationships and our best knowledge of the first century to identify persons from Paul’s social network who are “significant ancestors in faith” (Epaphras, vii). Each book uses its character as a lens for exploring various facets of early communities of believers, the world in which they took shape, the way the “good news” of Jesus Christ made an impact on their lives, and vice versa. In a word, the entire series is concerned with helping contemporary readers understand the context of the spread of Paul’s gospel network even after his death, the better to more richly imagine the dynamics of discipleship in our own time. Learning more about lesser-known figures from the earliest years of the Jesus mission reminds us that the call of faith has never been vouchsafed only to a few well-known heroes.

Both Trainor and Hartin are very learned about the texts, the cultures, and the geographical areas under consideration in these two slim volumes. In addition, both authors deal in a very sophisticated way with the different time periods of their texts. The results, however, are uneven, perhaps because of the greater number and length of references to Apollos, some of which come from Paul’s own hand, as well as from later materials.

We’ll begin with Hartin’s study of Apollos, a study in which he focuses on the question in the subtitle, “Paul’s partner or rival?” In order to examine this question, Hartin gathers the New Testament references to Apollos (1 Cor
1:10–17; 3:1–9, 21–23; 4:1–7; 16:12; Acts 18:24–28; Titus 3:13). Given the scanty references to him in the New Testament, Apollos remains an intriguing figure for a number of reasons. First, he is mentioned specifically by Paul. Secondly, he seems to have been involved in some dissension within the Corinthian communities of believers. Third (and not least), he is from Alexandria. This city became very important to early Christians, yet we know almost nothing about the origins and development of the faith there. How might one make the best use of social-scientific approaches to understand more fully who Apollos was and what he might tell us about the earliest spread of belief in Jesus Messiah?

Hartin divides his work along two main axes. First he looks at four central aspects of the culture that shaped Apollos and other early believers: the collectivistic nature of first-century Mediterranean persons; the relationship of Apollos to Corinth and its conflicts; the importance of Apollos’s Alexandrian roots; the relationship of Apollos to Paul and Paul’s social network. Hartin also looks very carefully at the difference between what can be learned from Paul’s letter, a first-generation text from the 50s C.E., and what can be learned from Acts, a “third-generation” text from forty years or so later. Hartin attends to how Luke’s backward look at Apollos and his distinctive approach to his story help us see Apollos more clearly.

The benefits of Hartin’s study are significant in many ways. The book reminds us that the ancient world is quite different from our own, even to the way in which we imagine persons. If we can begin to expand our understanding of how “good news” was indeed “good news” in the first-century Mediterranean world, perhaps we can see more clearly how the dynamics of “good news” challenges us. Also, if we can see the differences between the first-century Mediterranean culture and our own in relatively “safe” matters, such as the conflicts in Corinth and the identity of Apollos, perhaps we dare to see how difficult it is to move directly from first-century pronouncements into twenty-first century cultures in other matters. Finally, it is no small thing that Apollos is a well-educated man who finds a role in the early church. He was important in Paul’s network. Christian communities in our own time might benefit from considerations of how to involve more richly educated persons in the life of faith.

In Trainor’s study, Epaphras is also examined as an inhabitant of the first-century Mediterranean world. Trainor’s task is more complex than Hartin’s, in that Epaphras is mentioned only three times, in Philemon and Colossians. In addition, considerably less is known about the ancient city of Colossae than about Alexandria, and the letter to Philemon does not supply a clear geographic destination. Trainor, therefore, takes a slightly different approach. He describes and works with a model of social network analysis on the one hand; on the other, he uses geographic and archaeological information from the Lycus Valley. As he seeks to open up first-century culture and enable us to understand something of Epaphras’s and Paul’s networks, he focuses on domestic aspects of the social network. While Trainor’s work is not easy reading, his conclusions about Epaphras are interesting indeed, for he is revealed as part of a network that subverts some of the standard domestic patterns of the first century and creates a fictive kinship network with Jesus at its center (54).

Using Colossians, Trainor also sees Epaphras as an educator who is able to continue Paul’s work without slavish imitation of Paul. That is, Epaphras emerges as a Christian educator who “can authentically engage lifegiving tradition on behalf of Colossian Jesus groups” (95). Trainor’s own ministry in a small Roman Catholic parish in Elizabeth, Australia, deepened his appreciation of one like Epaphras, who is trusted to live out the gospel of Jesus in a less well-known place. If such books as these
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are read in church groups, clergy groups, in college or seminary classes, perhaps they might open our eyes as well.

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Throughout this book on how to approach the reading of Scripture, Lose continually raises up two convictions: questions are a necessary part of a life of faith—a life that includes reading the Bible—and the Bible is primarily the story of God and God’s people. With this in mind, Lose structures his book around seven questions that he deems important to explore as one considers how to read the Bible. In addressing each question, Lose converses with an imaginary discussion partner and peppers the text with analogies and stories to elucidate his points.

The first three chapters address the questions, “What is the Bible?” “Is the Bible true?” and “How is the Bible the word of God?” Looming large in these first three chapters is the matter of truth in relation to Scripture. Lose affirms his belief that the Bible is true and quickly moves the conversation to the question of how the Bible can be considered to be true. To do this, he introduces his imaginary conversation partner to the concept of fact-value split, noting that while it is common to think about truth in terms of fact, the two have not always been equated. The Bible, Lose contends, more often conveys truth in terms of meaning rather than in terms of historical fact, something that may have been more easily understandable to those living before the Enlightenment.

The remaining chapters deal with questions surrounding the compilation of the Bible, biblical criticism, and the authority of Scripture. His questions are: “Where did the Bible come from?” “How can I read the Bible with greater understanding?” “Is there a ‘center’ to Scripture?” and “What kind of authority does the Bible hold?” Here Lose introduces the reader to a time line for the compilation of Scripture, and to theories such as the gospel source Q. In addressing these issues, Lose provides ample biblical examples to demonstrate how one might be able to tell that sections of the Bible were written by different people, and how each author’s context led that author to express his story, or confession, in a specific way.

Affirming that every reading of Scripture entails interpretation, Lose leads the reader to consider how theological convictions and the community in which one lives and worships shape how Scripture comes to be interpreted. In response to concerns about a relativist reading, the author suggests that it is these same communal theological convictions that keep a reader’s scriptural interpretation within certain bounds.

All this leads to the book’s thesis, voiced in the words of the imaginary conversation partner, near the end of the book:

…”God speaks through the confessions of ordinary people to help me make sense of my life and join in the ongoing story of God’s mission to love, save, and bless the world. What’s extraordinary, when I think about it, isn’t so much the collection of confessions that make up the Bible itself. What is most amazing to me is that God wants to include me in all this in the first place and that God would use the ordinary people like those in the Bible and those in the church to do all that.

Lose maintains an informal and conversational style throughout the book that will open the door to those who are nervous about their ability to delve into the questions addressed in the book or who have been afraid to ask such questions themselves. His method of interac-
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“In Creation Untamed, Terry Fretheim adjusts his goggles and dives head first into the swirling storm of practical biblical and theological questions that we all ask about God, tragedy, and suffering. Fretheim admits that the Bible cannot provide all the answers. Mysteries remain. Yet Fretheim skillfully guides the reader through the dark and choppy waters of theology and suffering, suggesting helpful ways to move and warning against less promising ways of understanding. This book is deeply biblical, highly practical, and richly theological. Highly recommended!” —Dennis Olson, Princeton Theological Seminary
tion with an imaginary conversation partner will hopefully encourage readers who may find their own questions within the pages of the book. This dialogical approach works especially well for the first three chapters of the book, where the imagined conversation flows easily, inviting the reader to add his or her own experiences and stories to those described in the book.

Lose’s method works somewhat less well in the chapters on biblical compilation and methodology. For instance, his explanation regarding the compilation and canonization of Scripture necessitates more of a lecture style, and the interjections of the conversation partner have the effect of making portions of his argument somewhat choppy. This, however, is not insurmountable, and the choice to keep the conversational style may serve to keep the book from veering away from its intended audience.

The strength of this volume lies in Lose’s ability to use analogy to make sense of complicated and unfamiliar concepts. His artful use of story supports his argument that one’s identity is largely understood in terms of narrative, and his continual return to scriptural examples affirms that it is the Bible that holds a primary narrative for making sense of faith and life. Lose is to be commended for finding accessible language to express these complicated concepts and for writing in a way that is not in the least condescending.

While the book may be fruitfully read by an individual, it will be of even more use for congregational groups who wish to think more seriously about how and why Scripture might be read. Its structure of focusing each chapter on a specific question lends itself well to multi-week group study. It is a welcome addition to the materials published as part of Book of Faith Initiative of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

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Feminist Mysticism and Images of God: A Practical Theology
by Jennie S. Knight
Feminist theologians often claim that “women’s experience” is their starting point. However, feminist theology is remarkably void of analysis of particular women’s experiences of imaging God. Knight provides practical recommendations to help people transform images in the context of religious practices.

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and contemporary experiences of grief and anguish.

Though never divorced from the Old Testament, the book spends more time in the New Testament. Drawing primarily but not solely from the Synoptic Gospels, Malcolm highlights Jesus’ baptism and connects the Spirit to his proclaiming and calling into existence the kingdom of God. The Spirit is active in Jesus’ words and deeds on earth: announcing good news to the poor, healing, forgiving sins, and gathering followers. Malcolm is careful, however, not to exclude the experience of the crucifixion from the Spirit’s purview. She underscores Jesus’ intimate relationship with his “Abba,” and here we sense more palatable Trinitarian thought. Turning to Acts, Malcolm notes the charismatic nature of the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost and beyond as the gospel moves to the ends of the earth and includes Gentiles. The mystical nature of the sending of the Spirit in John is intimate and relational, as the Advocate, Jesus’ living presence, abides in us. Here there is only brief mention of Paul, but the reader need not fear that Malcolm neglects the Spirit in the Pauline themes of the body of Christ and love in the community. The final three chapters take their titles from the abiding gifts Paul names in 1 Corinthians: The Spirit Creates Faith, The Spirit Creates Love, and The Spirit Creates Hope. Through these, the Spirit’s creative power is clear both in individuals as well as in the community. A myriad of New Testament themes, among which are strong echoes of the Lutheran theological heritage, come to the surface in these chapters. Their order does not follow Paul’s, however. Malcolm switches hope and love, leaving the reader to finish with a sense of extraordinary hope in the Spirit’s power and activity, even unto death.

Without naming the Trinity in its classical formula, Malcolm repeatedly highlights the intimate relationship of the three persons. Thus the baptismal promise, in which we are given the same Spirit that was in Christ Jesus, leads us into the same intimate relationship with the Godhead and frees us to enter right and good relationship with others. Post-resurrection life in the Spirit is treated at length in four of the book’s six chapters, directing an individual or a community of readers to see itself as an intimate part of the Spirit’s creative work in the world today, called to do justice and to love the neighbor.

When referring to the spiritual acts and gifts of speaking in tongues, healings, exorcisms, and laying on of hands, Malcolm provides the context and some commentary but doesn’t unpack each of these at length. Depending on a group or individual’s comfort level with these things, a discussion leader will want to be prepared to respond to questions and explore them in greater depth. Like other Lutheran Voices books, each chapter concludes with questions for discussion. Because of the breadth Malcolm covers, the book could easily open up further conversation on all the issues it raises, including the Trinity, vocation, theology of the cross, the body of Christ and community, and spiritual experience in everyday life.

“Spirituality” is too often conceived as otherworldly and metaphysical. Malcolm’s book will undoubtedly counter this notion, as the Jewish and Christian Scriptures do, and open eyes to the presence of the Spirit in daily life. I have been asked numerous times in my years in pastoral ministry why Lutherans don’t ever talk about the Holy Spirit. Malcolm’s book eliminates the need for this question and opens time and space for more fruitful conversation.

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In case readers miss the title of Christian Scharen’s book, they will still have no trouble figuring out the book’s aim. In his brief foreword, Miroslav Volf links the words faith and life at least sixteen times, in phrases such as “lived faith,” “connecting faith with life,” and “faith…the shaper of life as a whole.” It was Volf who initiated the Faith as a Way of Life program at Yale, and Scharen who directed the laypeople, pastors, and theologians in the program to ask how “pastoral leaders” (Scharen’s term) might encourage their parishioners to live out their faith in their daily lives. In his book, Scharen synthesizes the group’s work, adding his own insights and putting the whole thing into a volume that is both theoretical and practical.

The problem the book addresses will be familiar to pastors. At the outset, Scharen relays his interaction with a parishioner named Liz, a working mother and wife who teases Scharen that he’s able to think about religion all the time. Liz, by contrast, views her faith as only one piece of her busy professional and family life, taking summers off from church for family leisure activities. Scharen realizes in this interaction that pastors often try to solve the problem Liz presents by encouraging more church activities and greater worship attendance. God, however, makes a greater claim on the lives of believers than simply more activity at church, transforming their entire lives such that their faith is lived out in their daily lives. Pastoral leaders, Scharen contends, are responsible for fostering such a lived-out faith.

At a couple of points in this book, Scharen seems to anticipate criticism from his Lutheran colleagues that Christian ministry ought to be concerned more with God’s ac-
tion than our own, more with faith than how that faith gets lived out. Scharen points to St. Paul’s words that we “walk in newness of life.” Faith, Scharen reminds us, has practical consequences in the life of the believer, even while this faith comes as a gift from the Holy Spirit.

Faith as a Way of Life points to compartmentalization and individualism as the chief obstacles to a lived faith. Scharen borrows heavily from sociologist Robert Bellah to describe the ways that modern history has driven wedges between the various spheres of our lives; Scharen focuses especially on the spheres of family, economy, government, and the arts. Worldly values get checked at the door of the church, and Christian values get checked at the door of one’s family or business. Scharen describes individualism as a language that conflicts with the language of faith, and suggests that Americans are increasingly fluent in the former, and decreasingly so in the latter. Whereas Christian faith encourages community and self-giving, modern culture encourages individualism and selfishness. In such a context, churches end up catering ministry to the solace of individuals in their own private havens from the world.

After relaying several stories of pastors who try bridging the gap between Sunday and the rest of the week, Scharen concludes that pastors can best foster lived faith if they see themselves as “spiritual guides” who point to a tension between the way things are in this world and the way God desires them to be. Further, pastors are to lead both practical exercises that show God’s activity in the various spheres of our lives—Scharen tells the story of a church that sponsors a sacred jazz concert series, interconnecting the spheres of faith and the arts—as well as lead interpretive exercises that help their parishioners understand God’s activity in these various spheres. Key to Scharen’s proposal is the pastor’s role in sending his or her congregation into the world to act as salt and light, witnessing to these same tensions and interconnections.

Two shortcomings should be mentioned. The first goes back to Volf’s contribution, and continues throughout. According to the book, pastors are to encourage their parishioners to live out their faith. True Christian faith, however, needs no such prompting. The doctor of Wittenberg proposed that faith doesn’t stop to ask if there are good works to be done; faith has already done them and continues doing them. This is not merely a Lutheran criticism, but takes its cue from Christ who said that if you make a tree good, you’ll get good fruit. The task of the pastor, then, is not to take Christian faith and bend it towards a certain kind of life (Scharen uses terms such as “shape” and “encourage” on page 12), but rather to preach in such a way that faith is created. By the Spirit’s power, the living out will take care of itself.

This leads into the second shortcoming. Scharen opens the first part of his book by saying, “Let me make the assumption that you are in agreement that pastoral excellence centers on the ability to shape persons and communities for living faith as a way of life.” Here a strange measuring stick presents itself: pastors being measured by the outcome in their parishioners’ lives. The Bible offers a different measuring stick, that is, faithfulness to God’s word. Prophets often spoke their message to recalcitrant audiences, and the Lord was chiefly concerned that those prophets would continue speaking his word faithfully, even when they knew in advance that the people would not turn to God and be saved. We have record of only one of St. Stephen’s sermons, and he was stoned for it. Anyone who heard Stephen preach that day might have walked away and thought he lacked pastoral excellence.

Even when the Holy Spirit does use the words of a preacher to create a living faith, those preachers may be hard pressed to know it. The sheep themselves will not be aware those preachers had cared for Christ “in the
Heinz’s description of the religious and cultural history of Christmas, from its origins in the sacred texts of early Christianity to the figure of Santa Claus to the commercial spree of today, is a marvelous pilgrimage through lived religion as it appears in folkways, music, art, and literature. Yet he also probes the meaning of this central festival and points us to a deeper appreciation of the reality of incarnation today.

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least of these.” Pastors preach and teach, and they let God do what he will with the word.

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Testing the Spirits is addressed to theological educators and students, pastors, and denominational officials and staff. Patrick Keifert, editor, states that this book recognizes a gap that exists between “the everyday realities of congregational life” and the “conversation with theology” (1). These essays are by team members of the Congregational Studies Research Team (CSRT), a part of the Church Innovations Institute (www.churchinnovations.org; 4, 45–46). The theological educators met face to face on regular occasions over a three-year period. At each meeting, they updated one another on their own academic work. They discussed and evaluated the major project of the research staff, and they invited noted scholars in related fields to join in reflecting on their work (3). The team drew on the theological works of James and Evelyn Whitehead and Thomas Groome. They also referred to Bernard Lonergan and Paul Ricoeur for some of their theoretical framework (9–10).

The mission statement of CSRT states that “we are a theological learning organization in direct partnership with congregations, church leaders, and teachers…this partnership seeks to build up and empower congregations for mission by engaging with them in a process of conversation and action involving spiritual discernment and theological reflection about the necessary behaviors, skills, beliefs, and knowledge base for faithfully and effectively bringing people to a public identity in Christ” (4).

Testing the Spirits has two parts. Part 1, with four essays, focuses on developing a theological approach for studying congregations: two essays are by Patrick Keifert and one essay each by David Fredrickson and Gary Simpson (11–88). Part 2, also with four essays, develops a theological approach for congregational moral discernment: there are two essays each by Pat Taylor Ellison and Ronald W. Duty (89–179). There is an epilogue by Lois Malcolm, followed by an appendix by Donald H. Juel, titled “The Use of Scripture in Congregational Research.”

In the essay “The Return of the Congregation to Theological Conversation” (13–26), Keifert acknowledges that “the congregation is the location where theology is practiced” (15). For the congregation the basic questions remain the same: “What is God up to here?” and “What is the Word of God for us in this place and time?” (21). Under the theme of returning, there is also a return of a sense of mission for the congregation (23). A return to the past is not possible; rather, the congregation will find itself profoundly shaped by the hallmarks of modernity (17).

In the essay titled “The Bible and Theological Education” (27–47), Keifert refers to Michael Welker’s description of the church as a “truth-seeking community,” and “to forsake this vocation (of truth seeking) would be for the church to forsake a core characteristic of its identity and to threaten its own missional character” (41). A missional church is one that understands itself as depending on the Holy Spirit for its sense of future.

David Fredrickson (48–66) claims that in the Pauline communities “God is acting and that this divine work in the congregation is the way God moves into the world for its salvation” (48). Paul is exhorting his readers to engage actively in the affairs of their own assembly, the local church.

Gary Simpson raises the question: How can
Christian congregations hear again the call to serve in a public vocation? (67). Simpson asks, “On what basis are Christian congregations free to engage in communicative moral practice within civil society?” (68). He points to congregations as public moral companions and builds on the early creeds and Luther’s writings, specifically the theology of the cross (72). Simpson also acknowledges that congregations have a vocation of being called and sent into the world to live and work as public moral companions to the structures and organizations that make up civil society (12).

Pat Taylor Ellison’s essay “Word-Dwelling, Deep Listening, and Faith-Based Moral Conversation in Congregations: A Nested Vision” (91–108) begins with some questions: “How do congregations articulate and nurture faith? How do they come to terms with tough issues, strangers, and one another as they wrestle through their daily lives? What do congregations do when they must face the unexpected, the unjust, the shocking, the perilous? What habits do they have and what habits should they grow?” (91). Congregations usually pass when it comes to doing theology, to which Ellison says, “the result is simply this: there is almost no out-loud talk about who God really is, or about what God is really doing...for the most part...we have forgotten the Word and dwelling within it, and we have disconnected ourselves from..."
speaking and hearing it with one another” (92–93).

Ronald W. Duty’s essay “Discerning the Will of God: Congregational Use of Scripture through the Lens of the Cross” (109–131) points out that “moral deliberation by the church is as old as the church itself.” Duty says that in discerning the will of God, “the cross itself, interpreted in various ways in a congregation’s life, becomes a lens through which we see Scripture, our experience, our communities of faith, and our world” (110, 124). In a second essay, “Scripture, Imagination, and Experience in Moral Conversation” (132–158), he makes reference to the ELCA draft statement on human sexuality. He gives examples of two contrasting congregations, Our Savior’s and Grace, as to how they approached their ability to imagine homosexuals as Christians and how they interpreted Scripture and church tradition with respect to homosexuals. Duty says, “When people do use Scripture in moral conversation, they use it in various ways. One way is to use it literally; quoting isolated passages for the plain sense of the text. Another literal use is what might be called ‘Bible bullets’: quoting passages backing the user’s point of view. People use these ‘bullets’ in exchanges with an intent to kill any reply from another perspective, and thus to cut off possible discussion involving different points of view” (147).

In the final essay, “Doing Faith-Based Conversation: Metaphors for Congregations and Their Leaders,” Pat Taylor Ellison points to three metaphors: pioneer, prophet, and servant-leader (166–179). Pioneers “deliberately move beyond the status quo to create a new and/or alternative future for those who matter most to them. Pioneers on the North American frontier left a civilized region behind to claim and settle new land. Most did not do that alone, but in groups of families” (166). Prophets in biblical times “were persons who were out of the ordinary because they had a special relationship with God.” Today, a public prophet may seem to be an anachronism. Ellison writes that “the Christian prophet understands God’s nature as love and mercy as revealed in Jesus and trusts in God’s faithfulness above all else. Prophets see the world in which we live as first belonging to and inhabited by God” (171). Ellison refers to Robert Greenleaf’s description of the servant-leader. The servant-leader is servant first and leader later. Ellison writes, “Of course, for Christians, Jesus is the primary model of servant-leader and demands that very behavior of his disciples” (175).

The late Donald Juel emphasized that “the Bible is principally important as a way of shaping Christian imagination.” Seeking to derive an answer to a controversial question from the Bible seldom settles anything, says Juel. We read the Bible, first, not to learn what we are to do, but rather to learn what God has done (201–202). I agree, and found helpful Juel’s comment that “perhaps one of the most important features of any conversation is the acknowledgment that disagreement is not an enemy.” Unless there are differences of opinion, no views will ever be challenged and no minds changed (204). Our task, Juel says, is to enlist the resources of the tradition to make the Bible come alive within congregations.

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