

# Reviews



**ENCOUNTERING ECCLESIASTES: A BOOK FOR OUR TIME**, by James Limburg. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006. Pp. 155. \$14.00 (paper).

James Limburg, Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, demonstrates again in this volume the remarkable and rare ability not only to master the latest academic scholarship in a particular area of study, but also to make it available to non-specialists in a way that is eminently accessible, lively, engaging, and relevant. I say *again* in the previous sentence, because Limburg has been doing this throughout his career—see, for instance, his *The Prophets and the Powerless, Psalms for Sojourners, Hosea-Micah* in the Interpretation series, and *Psalms* in the Westminster Bible Companion series. As I see it, Limburg's works are a superb example of what every seminary professor should strive for in his or her scholarly writing.

As for the study of the book of Ecclesiastes, Limburg's scholarship is impeccable. He is clearly conversant with the latest work on Ecclesiastes by scholars such as William P. Brown, Ellen F. Davis, Michael V. Fox, Thomas Krüger, Norbert Lohfink, Roland E. Murphy, Iain Provan, Leong Seow, and Elsa Tamez, as well as older work on Ecclesiastes by Elias Bickerman, Robert Gordis, and Gerhard von Rad. What really stands out in this book, however, is not Limburg's citation of other scholars, but rather his illustration of the lessons he has learned from Ecclesiastes by citing such sources as Peggy Lee, Rabbi Harold Kushner, Pete Seeger, The Byrds, columnist Ellen Goodman, Reinhold Niebuhr, and more, including

his own personal experiences in living with and teaching the book of Ecclesiastes over the course of a career.

Limburg's first personal encounter with Ecclesiastes came at a family funeral, when his mother pointed out to him her father's tombstone, which reads, "LEICHEN TEXT/PRED. 7,2" ("Funeral Text/Ecclesiastes 7:2"). He went home and looked up the text in the KJV ("It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to heart"). He describes the impact of this experience as follows: "I thought for a moment of my own mortality, and...I made a resolve to begin an investigation of the book of Ecclesiastes in order to understand that inscription on my grandfather's tombstone" (89; see the photo of the tombstone on page xi). At this point in his volume, Limburg reflects upon one of the primary themes of Ecclesiastes—that is, the importance of being aware of our own mortality, so that we will be led to receive life as a gift from God and to live our allotted time humbly but enthusiastically. And from that point in his life, Limburg began his journey with the book of Ecclesiastes, the fruits of which are evident in this volume.

Another memorable moment on Limburg's journey with Ecclesiastes was in a college classroom, in which one of his students suddenly "came alive" (42), as she identified with the unrelenting honesty of Qoheleth and his persistent question, "Who knows?" As Limburg points out, such questioning may properly be labeled "agnosticism" (43), another theme of the book. But in the final analysis, as Limburg also makes clear, Qoheleth's

agnosticism is not merely skeptical; rather, it is a reverent agnosticism that motivates him to entrust the unknown future to God.

In essence, what has Limburg learned along the way of his journey with Qoheleth, the Teacher? In short, the lesson is this—that although life is fleeting and often frustrating and even seemingly absurd at times, it is well worth living, and indeed is to be lived with joy and gratitude and without anxiety, because it is God’s good gift to humankind. To be sure, Qoheleth was in touch with the downside of human existence. “Vanity” (Hebrew *hevel*) is the key word here; the phrase “vanity of vanities” frames the book (1:2; 12:8), and there are numerous occurrences of *hevel* in between, leading Limburg to borrow von Rad’s musical analogy to characterize this pervasive theme as “the pedal point” of the book—that is, “a sustained bass note running through an organ composition or portion of a composition” (12). But as Limburg points out, the pedal point “is never the main focus of the musical composition”; rather, the main focus is “a melody, perhaps a sturdy chorale, or maybe even an exciting, even joyful counterpoint” (137). In the case of Ecclesiastes, the joyful, contrapuntal melody is “the ‘joy’ theme” (137; see 33–35, 45–52, 77–78, 106–111, 114–116) sounded in Eccl 2:24–26; 3:12–13, 23; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:8–12:1—enjoy the simple, God-given pleasures of work, food, drink, and companionship. According to Limburg, Qoheleth offered this message to his students in the mid-third century BCE, a time when God and God’s “mighty acts” seemed long ago and far away. But as the title of Limburg’s volume suggests, the lesson is still quite timely in our age of anxiety, boredom, workaholism, overconsumption, and the often frantic and fruitless pursuit of pleasure and meaning.

Scholars will appreciate and learn from Limburg’s work, but even more so will pastors and teachers in the church. Pastors and teachers, Lutheran and otherwise, will appreciate Limburg’s recognition that his interpretive

work is congruent with that of Martin Luther on Ecclesiastes (see 7, 17–19, 78, 116, 137–138), as well as that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (see 47–52). I have recommended this volume to scores of people, and I have been and will be using it in the seminary classroom. It would also be a very helpful resource for an adult education course on Ecclesiastes in a congregation, especially with a group who may see themselves closer to the edges of “orthodoxy” (see 40–45).

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**READING THE BIBLE WITH THE DEAD: WHAT YOU CAN LEARN FROM THE HISTORY OF EXEGESIS THAT YOU CAN’T LEARN FROM EXEGESIS ALONE**, by John L. Thompson. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007. Pp. xi + 324. \$20.00 (paper).

Despite its somewhat morbid title, *Reading the Bible with the Dead* is a lively book meant for people grappling with the mysteries of life, particularly those who preach regularly. By examining the history of exegesis of select difficult passages, the author, Fuller Theological Seminary’s John L. Thompson, seeks both to reassure modern exegetes that these texts have always proved challenging, and to unlock a rich repository of insights collected over the centuries. A third goal is to reclaim for the church these problematic texts, so conspicuous for their absence from sermons and lectionaries. He describes his task as “connecting the church with the church” (226), i.e., connecting the contemporary church (and its contemporary questions) with the richness of its exegetical tradition. As an additional aid for the reader a bibliography of commentaries that have been translated into English is supplied, as well as very good notes, general bibliography, and indices.

Thompson presents this work as an extension of Phyllis Tribble's pioneering lectures "Unpreached Stories of Faith" (later published as *Texts of Terror*), an iconic *cri de coeur* of feminism. The irony is that most commentators of the past come off as much less anti-woman than common stereotypes might suggest. For instance, Thompson reports that "honoring Hagar is nothing new" (30), and "There never was a 'golden age' when the prohibitions [of 1 Cor 14:24–35 and 2 Tim 2:12] against women speaking and teaching were not controversial" (183).

The fun in the book, however, is in the many probing and creative exegetical insights Thompson has uncovered. Genesis 21 describes Abraham casting Hagar and Ishmael out after Sarah has reported seeing the lad Ishmael "playing." This harsh response to what seems such normal childhood activity is explained in *Midrash Rabbah* through the suggestion that this "playing" was attempted homicide or some kind of shameful sexual activity, perhaps with his half-brother Isaac. The Hebrew word employed is "capable of all the ambiguity of the English 'play'" (23). The rabbis associated this term with such shameful deeds as the charge of Potiphar's wife that Joseph had tried to "sport" with her, the idolatrous "play" of the Israelites associated with the golden calf, and the "tournament" in 2 Sam 2:14 that turned deadly (23). Several subsequent Christian commentators would follow this line of interpretation.

Similarly, Rabbi David Kimchi influenced the way Nicholas of Lyra and Sebastien Münster understood Judg 11. This chapter contains the horrifying story of Jephthah's daughter and her father's notorious vow, which is usually translated "If [the Lord gives] the sons of Ammon into my hand, whatever comes forth...shall be the Lord's, *and* I will offer it up." Kimchi, however, suggested that the Hebrew conjunction could be read disjunctively: "*or* I will offer it up." "In other words, Jephthah meant to offer a burnt sacrifice if greeted by a

suitable victim, but if met by a person, he would 'devote' that individual to the Lord, presumably as a perpetual servant of the temple" (43). Thus the daughter was not killed, but rather was devoted—in her virginity—to the work of the Lord.

Although usually they are above this, sometimes the commentators blame the victim. Zwingli "vented palpable anger at Dinah," Jacob's daughter who was raped by Shechem after she "went out to visit the daughters of the land" (Gen 34:1). He was convinced that the imperfect verb of that verse was best construed in an iterative sense: "Dinah regularly, habitually went out to visit the daughters of the land." According to Zwingli, because she didn't stay at home where she belonged, she bore responsibility for what happened to her (191).

Other exegetical cruxes are also worthy of note: Did the Levite's concubine of Judg 19 leave her husband because she "was angry" (so the LXX and Vulgate) or because she "played the harlot" (as in the MT)? Thompson expresses puzzlement that Jerome's translation followed the LXX rather than the "Hebrew truth" of which he was so fond, apparently not considering the possibility that the Hebrew text Jerome knew resembled the LXX at this point rather than the MT (194), though this possibility is raised later in a different context (198). Also interesting is the range of exegetical speculation about Bathsheba's bath and King David's voyeurism (2 Sam 11:2). Thompson notes that the NRSV translation, "she was purifying herself after her period," suggests that Bathsheba's subsequent pregnancy "had to be by David, not Uriah" (198). None of the ancient versions states this precisely, leaving the nature of Bathsheba's bath unclear. While some commentators chide Bathsheba for not being more discreet, and she is never held up as a paragon of virtue, there is widespread resistance to shifting blame from David to the vulnerable wife of Uriah (198–203). Also of considerable interest is Thompson's discussion of attempts to reconcile the imprecatory

psalms with “Jesus’ command to pray for our enemies, not curse them” (221; and the whole of chapter 3).

In his chapter entitled “Silent Prophetesses?” Thompson explores the tension in the exegetical tradition between the presence of prophetesses on the pages of the New Testament (e.g., the daughters of Philip; the prophetesses of 1 Cor 11:2–16) and the charges found in 1 Cor 14:34 that “women should keep silence in the churches” (cf. 1 Tim 2:12). Neither Thompson, nor apparently his commentators from the past, mention the text-critical evidence suggesting 1 Cor 14:34–35 is not original (see Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*), but they find other more creative ways to reconcile the evidence. Heinrich Bullinger redefines prophecy as “a purely passive understanding of the word of God” (117), a type of internal illumination, so one did not need to speak to function as a prophet/prophetess. Most, however, chose not to circumscribe prophecy, but rather to limit the scope of the restrictions on female speech. Chrysostom (*Greet Priscilla and Aquila* 1.3) is the pioneer in this regard: “Women were forbidden to teach publicly, so they must have carried out their instruction in private” (117). Moreover, “Calvin implied that women who ‘privately’ exercised the gift of prophecy (which he viewed as a teaching function) might well have done so in groups that included men” (177).

The embarrassing claim of 1 Tim 2:14 that “Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived” was often harmonized through use of the *analogy of faith* (interpreting unclear passages by those that are clearer). “Adam was not deceived’ thus became ‘not deceived by a snake’ or ‘not deceived in the way Eve was deceived’” (177). Applying this principle of “reading for the center” is often salutary, but at times it has been applied in excess and resulted in the *de facto* silencing of large chunks of the biblical text.

*Reading with the Dead* is both learned and accessible, and throughout it provokes deeper

consideration of Scripture. That judgment is, I think, high praise.

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**IDOLATRY AND THE HARDENING OF THE HEART: A STUDY IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**, by Edward P. Meadors. New York: T&T Clark, 2007. Pp. 214. \$35.00 (paper).

One of the most exacerbating conundrums in Christian theology is the question of “how to reconcile God’s love and mercy with his active, unyielding ‘hardening’ of human hearts” (1). Though this is not a new question, it remains an important one. Traditional theological approaches to the problem underscore two opposing ideas: either God is the direct cause of all hardening (*determinism*), or human beings cause their own hardening (*free will*). However, rather than engage the debate between these approaches, as his predecessors have done, Edward P. Meadors begins with the premise that God initiates all hardening, then proceeds to tackle the daunting problem of *why* God hardens human hearts in the Bible. Written primarily for those with an extensive background in biblical and theological jargon, this in-depth, systematic analysis of the connection between hardening and idolatry in the Bible provides a refreshing, comprehensive approach to the problem.

Meadors’s purpose, stated in the preface, is to “provide a biblical, theological answer to Isaiah’s question, ‘Why, O Lord, do you cause us to stray from your ways, and harden our heart from fearing you?’ (Isa 63:17a).” He locates the answer to the question in Pss 115:4–8; 135:15–18, both of which express the paradigm that those who worship idols inevitably become like the idols they worship. Meadors stresses the First and Second Commandments of the covenant between God and Israel

as the foundation upon which this hardening paradigm is based: Yahweh is to be the sole object of Israel's worship, as well as the one who gives Israel its unique identity. When Israel engages in idolatry, it denies its God and its identity, which results in hardening, an expression of divine judgment. Meadors's primary goal in his book is to trace this paradigm throughout the Bible, beginning with Pharaoh's hardening in Exodus (chap. 3), through Israel's hardening in the Prophets (chap. 5), Gospels (chap. 6), Acts (chap. 7), and Romans (chaps. 8–10), and concluding with the hardening of those who worship the beast in Revelation (chap. 11). The final chapter includes applications of the hardening paradigm to the contemporary situation.

After Meadors discusses the biblical and Egyptian concepts of the heart, he examines Pharaoh's hardening in Exodus. Taking great care to locate the Exodus narrative within its Egyptian context, Meadors argues that Pharaoh's hardening was a direct result of his polytheistic, self-idolizing worldview. The plagues, intertwined with Pharaoh's hardening, served to illustrate God's systematic destruction of the Egyptian gods. The keynote of this chapter is Meadors's assertion that the Exodus story sets the stage for understanding the pattern of God's judgment and redemption for Israel throughout the Bible (18). That is, Pharaoh's hardening, in addition to the hardening of the foreign kings in the historical books (chap. 4), are indications to Israel of the pattern that her own relationship with God will take in later generations.

The underlying question Meadors seeks to answer in his analysis of the prophetic books is, "Why would [God] harden his own people and prevent them from repenting?" (56). Meadors's analysis of hardening passages in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Hosea leads him to several conclusions. First, the form of Israel's idolatry begins to shift from the worship of images to an "external religiosity" that consists of pride and the empty perform-

ance of prescribed cultic rituals. Both hamper genuine, exclusive worship of God. Second, hardening is not arbitrary, but rather a direct consequence of the sin of idolatry. Third, hardening ultimately leads to salvation, not solely through repentance, but via the removal of idols and God's transforming work upon the human heart. In this connection, Meadors asserts that "the new covenant is God's solution to the problem of the hardened heart" (71). So-called "new covenant" passages such as Ezek 36:22–32 and Jer 31:31–34 demonstrate that God hardens the heart as divine judgment, which in turn leads people to genuine repentance from idolatry and ultimately to genuine worship.

Meadors's greatest contribution to this particular theological discussion can be found in the second part of his book, where he focuses on hardening and idolatry in the New Testament. He argues that the new covenant passages of the Old Testament find concrete expression in Christ's saving work on the cross. Salvation is available to those who have faith; that is, those who can see and hear the living word of God. Meadors contends that in the New Testament idolatry takes the subtle form of misappropriated reliance upon wealth, the temple, and the law (79), a form alluded to in the prophetic books. Throughout the New Testament, those who put their ultimate trust in such external realities become hardened in the sense that they cannot perceive the living, saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Hardening in the New Testament, in the absence of genuine repentance and worship, results in permanent exclusion from God's promise of salvation.

Meadors concludes with a discussion of three contemporary "idols" that jeopardize Christians: pride, poor theology, and shallow worship. In effect, he argues that each one places the self and the needs of the self above true worship of God, resulting in the inability to bear witness to the saving acts of God. Arguably, it is Meadors's conclusion that is the

most profound portion of the book, because it compels us to look deep within ourselves, examine our own tendencies toward idolatry, confront the reality of our hardened state, and ask God for forgiveness and a reassurance of eternal life.

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**THE SCANDALOUS GOD: THE USE AND ABUSE OF THE CROSS**, by Vítor Westhelle. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006. Pp. 180. \$22.00 (paper).

A theology of the cross sets limits on what properly can be said. Or, a theologian of the cross takes the risk of evoking the scandal of the cross, and so uses language to articulate a scandal that defies expression, “a thing beyond telling, out of reach of words” (6). Since the cross breaks epistemologically the way we normally organize our understanding of the world, articulating the cross is a linguistic impossibility; nevertheless, a theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is and so risks articulating that which cannot be articulated, making poetry out of things beyond the reach of words.

Vítor Westhelle’s book is just such an undertaking; it is a discourse about cross and suffering that takes the risk, offering the thesis that Christ suffered precisely because he named the cause of suffering. Westhelle asks a question that Paul and Luther also asked: “What can I know of God in face of the cross or according to the cross (*kata stauron*)?” (75). He finds in this epistemological question a way of bringing together two theological traditions that have often been unnecessarily divided—the Reformation itself, and liberation theology. Both traditions, he argues, are committed to reorienting theology through the experience of liminality, the liminality of the cross. This liminality is best encapsulated in the great

statement of Luther—the cross alone is our theology (110).

Westhelle so reiterates an important distinction made clear in the writings of a few other contemporary Lutheran theologians, including Roy A. Harrisville and Gerhard Forde, namely, that the theology of the cross is not “a theology,” but a way of doing theology. One might say that there is not a theology of the cross per se, but rather there are theologians of the cross. *The Scandalous God* proves that Westhelle is one of our most gifted and articulate theologians of the cross. This is a book to be read and reread as training in being a theologian of the cross.

Since Westhelle has assembled a book that seeks to articulate that which cannot be articulated, and construct a theology that is not one among others but rather a way of doing theology, it is no surprise that the benefits of the book lie not so much in a grand concluding thesis, or a list of constructive proposals, but rather precisely in its being a set of explorations and forays. Westhelle is interested in evoking and eliciting thoughts about pain, death, and the cross (xi). Throughout, Westhelle makes use of surprising and beautiful poetry to illustrate and prod. The poetry in the book (some of it original translations by the author) could almost stand alone as an anthology of “poetry of the cross.”

The first part of the book is a historical survey of the uses and the abuses of the cross, including chapters on the cross in the early church, the Reformation, and the modern period. The second half of the book is organized according to expansive categories of human thought and creativity—epistemology, poiesis, and praxis. Possibly the most intriguing proposal in this section is Westhelle’s definition of orthopraxis—“a practice of solidarity with the pain of the world, which follows the encounter with Christ crucified” (112). This is the *tentatio* that Luther argued “made” a theologian. It is also the central tenet of liberation theology. In uniting the two theological tradi-

tions, Westhelle lifts up the precise way in which the theology of the cross is a “disposition” shaped by the cross rather than a theology about the cross.

Woven throughout the book are profound reflections on one of the most paradoxical and scandalous (and so overlooked or ignored) aspects of Lutheran theology, the *deus nudus* (the naked God). What are we to do with statements of Luther like the following: “Nothing against God but God’s own self” (30) or “to flee from God and find refuge in God against God” (59; 155)? Or with Friedrich Hölderlin (in Westhelle’s translation): “It is where danger lies that liberation comes from, but do we want to be saved?” (158). Salvation is hidden under its opposite—in death and suffering. Seldom do works of theology offer sustained reflection on this scandalizing paradox. Westhelle’s book is an exception.

Westhelle offers a last chapter on “the stations of the cross revisited” to try and map an itinerary of this scandal, one of the more profound reflections on Sabbath and Holy Saturday (the time between Good Friday and Easter Sunday) that I have ever read. His meditation includes this excerpt from a poem of Wendell Berry: “Unless we grieve like Mary / at His grave, giving Him up / as lost, no Easter morning comes” (140), that could stand as an apt encapsulation of Westhelle’s whole book, except that after reading the book, these lines of Wendell Berry take on a new profundity and depth that prove the power of Westhelle’s project.

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**AUTHENTIC FAITH: BONHOEFFER’S THEOLOGICAL ETHICS IN CONTEXT**, by Heinz Eduard Toedt. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007. Pp. 298. \$24.00 (paper).

In this marvelous collection of essays, edited by Ernst-Albert Scharffenorth in 1993 (brought forth in English by Glen Stassen in 2007) and translated by David Stassen and Ilse Toedt, we have a goldmine of source material and reflections that offer essential themes in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s theology and ethics. At the instigation of Clifford Green, and in cooperation with Eerdmans Publishing Company, this grouping of essays, dating from 1976 to 1990, “achieves a precision in understanding key dimensions of Bonhoeffer’s ethics that is hard to match elsewhere” (viii). Glen Stassen, who studied with Toedt in the 1980s in Heidelberg, writes that, “Toedt’s publications have an analytical sharpness, an ethical incisiveness, and a genuine truthfulness that is rare even among the best....he unearths major dimensions of Bonhoeffer’s ethics, and enables us to enter personally into the political, ecclesiastical, and family context in which Bonhoeffer wrote” (vii).

Heinz Eduard Toedt was born in Germany in 1918, completing his doctorate in theology at Heidelberg in 1957, having earlier served five years on the battlefield during World War II and then five more years in detention as a Russian POW. He became professor of systematic theology, ethics, and social ethics at Heidelberg in 1963 and was active in ecumenical work most of his career. Toedt chaired the editorial board of the recently completed *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* (1998). Throughout his career he published extensively on human rights, revolution, and peace in a technological world. Toedt’s passionate interest in Bonhoeffer came from his desire to learn “what it was about Bonhoeffer’s ethics that enabled him to see more clearly and speak out more decisively than other theologians and church leaders,

from the very start of Hitler's rule." Toedt came to believe that Bonhoeffer "passes the test in the laboratory of history—the test that so many failed" (viii). This passion also led Toedt to institute the "Heidelberg Research Project" that sought to analyze the social, theological, and ethical characteristics of the Bonhoeffer-Dohnanyi circle of resistance.

Of the fourteen essays that comprise *Authentic Faith*, the first eleven detail themes in Bonhoeffer's own theology and ethics. The final three essays take the reader—with Bonhoeffer—into more recent history, specifically the topics of guilt and responsibility in Germany in the postwar time. Before proceeding, I would like to add the caveat that those readers who will profit most from this collection of essays are those somewhat acquainted with Bonhoeffer's life and basic works. Toedt does not, in these essays, offer basic biographical information for the uninitiated reader. His audiences, when the lectures were first given, were those already somewhat knowledgeable in Bonhoeffer studies.

The earliest essay in this collection is dated 1976 and discusses Bonhoeffer's theological relationship to Karl Barth. The specific subject under investigation is that of "religion," keying off Bonhoeffer's prison writings about a "world come of age" (i.e., maturity) and the essence and shape of revelation. Toedt asks whether Bonhoeffer's and Barth's understandings are "contentious or convergent." A second essay comes from 1980 and addresses Bonhoeffer's move from "verbal resistance" to active "political resistance," using the categories of the individual, group, and church for diagnosis. While an individual struggles with conscience when venturing into an "illegitimate deed," and while small "initiative groups" provide "solidarity and communication," the church—for both—provides "certainty through witnessing to the truth" (71). Two essays from 1982 speak about Bonhoeffer's early insights regarding his ecumenical ethic of peace and the Nazi discrimination

against Jews. Toedt argues that Bonhoeffer's political ethic for both is "strictly from the viewpoint of a church that is earnestly obedient in its confession of faith...in the first case, for an international order of peace, and in the second case, for a state of justice in Germany" (110). A single lecture from 1983 offers the reader a glimpse of Toedt's reflections on Bonhoeffer's "Late Theology," using the concepts of "meaning and promise," drawing primarily upon the prison reflections with a few passages from the *Ethics*.

Two samples of material from 1985 include challenges that surface from any examination of Bonhoeffer's "disquieting" legacy: his proposed worldly interpretation of the Bible; Bonhoeffer—the pastor—belonging to a resistance group planning tyrannicide; a scarcity of material that could provide continuity for his entire life; and specifically how the church after the war has attempted to "suppress responsibility" for much of what happened between 1933 and 1945. Toedt, in the spirit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, realizing that forces beyond the individual exert immense pressure, writes, "Nevertheless the individual, included in the fatal train of events that is connected through guilt, remains morally responsible" (285). The essays chosen from 1987 specifically deal with the ethical dynamics of conscience in the resistance circles, with an interim report on the "Heidelberg Research Project." Considerable detail is given about the variety of attitudes represented in the resistance circles, with greatest attention given to the Bonhoeffer-Dohnanyi group. Toedt argues for greater nuance and differentiation, lest oversimplification violate both the truth and potential lessons learned. The remaining essays (two from 1988, two from 1989, and one from 1990) pick up on the themes of religion, conscience, and human rights, as well as a critique of the German justice system after 1945.

Frits de Lange, a Bonhoeffer scholar and ethicist from the Netherlands, endorses this book with the following helpful words: "With

historical sensibility and conceptual precision [Toedt] conscientiously sheds light into the moral complexities behind Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ethics. Having been personally involved in the 'German fate,' Toedt is one of our best guides to Bonhoeffer, showing how his theological ethics can help us with faithful decision-making today." De Lange adds, "Heinz Eduard Toedt is the teacher we all wish we'd had."

Not for the weak-hearted, this "goldmine of sources and reflections" is a profound collection that can assist the disciples of Jesus Christ today to walk responsibly—with Bonhoeffer and beyond Bonhoeffer—as they love and serve the world.

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**GETTING INTO CHARACTER: THE ART OF FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE PREACHING**, by Stephen Chapin Garner. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008. Pp. 142. \$15.99 (paper).

Do you recognize in yourself the gift of actor or actress? Do you wish your delivery of sermons was more varied and effective? Here is the book for you! *Getting into Character: The Art of First-Person Preaching* is a well-chosen title for a book that focuses on developing first-person monologues as sermons.

The author, Stephen Garner, leads his readers through a "how to" curriculum of creative writing to develop monologue scripts that bring to life the spirit of biblical characters. With a clear warning to remain true to the intended exegesis and basic message, he offers the preacher specific instructions for creating an effective presentation as a sermon. Garner emphasizes the development of voice, presence, and movement while discouraging the use of costumes, written notes, or language that is not conversational. He encourages ex-

periential time spent in listening to sermons (good and bad) and attending plays that are rich in monologue and dialogue. And to nurture the initiate, the last chapter of the book gives a load of resources to help hone drama skills in both writing and acting.

Clearly, Stephen Garner is a lover of theater. He admits that in a former career he was proficient as a playwright and actor. We could ask for no better drama coach. He convincingly underscores for us that the greatest share of Scripture is presented as drama, and that this holy drama has striking similarities to stage plays, movies, and TV productions. Characters are imbued with definite personalities, human weaknesses, desires, and heroics. The familiar biblical cast has characteristics with which people in the pews can identify easily.

There are some no doubt fine examples of ready-to-go monologues in the book: Hamlet, Joseph (Mary's husband), the father of the Prodigal Son, the man who hired the Prodigal Son, Hagar, Joshua, and a New Testament scribe. Personally, however, I would be reluctant to use any of them as a sermon. My experience makes me cautious.

I am noted for using drama as one of my styles of sermon delivery. In a broad sense, it is drama to literally take the part of one or more characters as one tells the story. I insert my own stage directions, so to speak, to explain what is really happening. I stop, stare, and draw out the exclamation as I deliver the maid's accusation of Peter in the courtyard: "Ah, you also were with this Jesus, weren't you?" Donning a dumbfounded look and adding a stammer, I give Peter's response: "I, I, I don't know what you are talking about!" It can be very effective to dramatically portray each speech in first person *within the storytelling*. But to rely completely on monologue can be tricky. There is often a feeling of "hokey-ness" about first-person sermons. I have done at least three first-person monologues in my four decades as preacher, and most often wished I hadn't.

It is less a question of dramatic ability than professional limitations. The preacher cannot escape his or her identity to the congregation. I think a certain authenticity is lost when a congregation sees its pastor as actor or actress attempting to be Joseph or the Virgin Mary, no matter how well the part is portrayed or scripted. Garner himself gives an unintentional disclaimer for his main thesis when he admits: “the more authentic someone appears, the more likely we are to follow” (88).

I was hoping that the book would be less focused on first-person monologues and offer a broader presentation of techniques toward developing us, as preachers, into more successful dramatists in our sermon deliveries. Still, the book has much to offer in its strong emphasis on the importance of sermon delivery styles. Garner is correct, and I think all can agree with him, when he states:

Many pastors today spend hours in their study crafting a theological paper to be delivered to their congregations on Sunday morning. This type of sermon is dense with grammatically and theologically correct sentences and ideas. Listening to such a sermon, however, is often a painfully boring experience—the preacher’s eyes and head buried in a manuscript the entire time. It feels as if the preacher is talking at you instead of with you. Effective preachers tend to employ a more conversational style of delivery that allows the listeners to feel as though they are part of the conversation. (79)

After finishing this book, I was affirmed as to the value and effectiveness of a well-delivered, heartfelt sermon. This is not a new and profound idea, and it is definitely not to say that every Sunday should be a theater in the sanctuary. The book advocates for dramatic interpretation, but it also lifts up the need to vary our styles. Garner emphatically states this over and over. To preach a first-person monologue every week, even if it were possible, would become mundane. So, also, with an every-week

dose of any one style! He challenges us to “feel” the text as lectionary preachers. He encourages us to consider how best to communicate the message of each individual text. Sometimes it is by manuscript with well-thought-out phrases as the exegesis suggests a didactic approach. Sometimes it begs for carefully constructed drama. Sometimes the text lends itself to simple storytelling. And sometimes it can best be delivered in a very conversational way with nothing more than a few written notes.

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**SIMUL: LUTHERAN VOICES IN POETRY**, collected and edited by Mark Patrick Odland. Xulon Press, 2007. Pp xii + 190. \$13.99 (paper).

Some years ago a friend of mine, a poet, ruminated on the sad state of poetry. It was his opinion that nobody took the time to read poetry anymore. When, for the sake of argument, I entered a demur, he demonstrated his point by asking (and embarrassing) me: When was the last time you read a book of poetry? Were we to have that conversation today, I would have an answer for him, for I have had the pleasure of reading Mark Odland’s anthology called *Simul: Lutheran Voices in Poetry*.

The book contains nearly 140 short works of poetry, none longer than a page. Culled from over 1,200 submissions, the poems cover a wide range of experience and emotions. They come from a broad spectrum of writers, as brief biographies at the end of the book demonstrate. In his preface Odland explains his vision and the reasons for this collection, which arise from the Lutheran faith tradition. “The name of this anthology reflects Martin Luther’s observation that as children of God we are both fully saints and fully sinners simultaneously. It is the goal of *Simul* to reflect this

paradox, and explore the complexity, beauty, and messiness of the human condition" (xii).

Complexity, for example, is assayed in a poem entitled "Walking," by Riitta Passananti. After describing a walk in the woods that simultaneously evokes reality and memory, the poet encounters blooming May flowers and a friend. Although she wishes for the conversation to endure, the walker inevitably realizes that the expansive moment cannot last, for

the path runs into the road  
the past crashes into today  
I turn to wave  
they stay behind  
ghost dogs ghost friend  
they wait (109)

The anthologist's goal of beauty is realized in an evocative poem by Christie Nielsen entitled "Old Friend." The poem, here in its entirety, beautifully speaks of friendship:

Beautiful and rich is an old friendship,  
Grateful to the touch as ancient ivory.

Smooth as aged wine or sheen of tapestry  
Where light has lingered, intimate and  
long.  
Full of tears and warm is an old  
friendship  
That asks no longer deeds of gallantry,  
Or any deed at all—save that the friend  
shall be  
Alive and breathing somewhere, like a  
song. (79)

The messiness of the human condition is addressed in a number of poems that speak of death, abuse, loneliness, wistfulness, and the sadness of missed opportunities. The latter is simply adduced in a four-stanza poem entitled "Bird Feeders," by Linda J. Hommes. The poet wistfully recounts a simple request by her mother to "Fill the bird feeders." It was not done; and now the mother languishes in a facility where she has no windows to see the birds.

"Fill the bird feeders"  
her voice echoes in my memory  
the same refrain

as I pass the window we once shared  
wishes not granted  
what I could have done  
when she asked me. (68)

Hommel's poem centers on human experience in which things are done and things are left undone. An imaginative reader might hear in that poem an echo of a parable told by Jesus (Matt 21:28–32). That story of two sons is also one of missed opportunity. Many of the other poems in this book also have intentional links with biblical or theological background. Some reflect that background in indirect ways; others in ways that are more straightforward. Le Anne Clausen's "Fully God and Fully Human," for example, addresses the christological matter of Jesus' humanity in a carnal and thought-provoking way (22). Poems like "The Vigil of Easter" by Stephen C. Bond (108) ring out with the good news that "Jesus is not here" (in the tomb) but, at the same time "Jesus is here" (with us now). If readers are interested in tracking the church year poetically, they will find works that celebrate sacred time from Advent through Easter. Christmas is celebrated with a touch of hilarity in a poem by Grant Perry in which the author disagrees with his daughter's fundamental religious beliefs, and

I think she's wrong about her politics,  
too—  
but she's my daughter and I love her,  
and we celebrate Christmas together.  
(136)

Readers will find some of the poems moving, while others may not be to their liking. Some may be seen as captivating, others as sentimental. But the bulk of the works should strike chords for people raised in the Lutheran tradition, and for others, one hopes, from a wider tradition. A reader who takes the time to read poetry should find in this book reflections that will both comfort and disturb. Most of the poems address the word and the world from a historical and biblical point of view, something that is refreshing in an age that moves swiftly, leaving memory and tradition behind.

At one point in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, by Azar Nafisi, the author's father, against the backdrop of fear and warfare, says "Our true home, our true history is in our poetry." The poetry in this book brings us back to a vantage point where we can see and appreciate our true home, our true history. Read in solitude or in small groups over coffee, these poems can shine lights in some dark corners. If Garrison Keillor can brighten a day by sharing a poem on NPR's *Writer's Almanac*, then patient, inquiring readers should likewise be nourished by dipping into and tasting the works in this anthology.

In the end, my poet friend might wish to modify his views about people reading poetry. This anthology, if nothing else, demonstrates that people do. Another acquaintance has recently observed that poets restore vitality to a bland culture and that the internet is playing a role in developing American poetry in manifold ways. In reading *Simul* one can breathe the rich atmosphere where words lift the spirit, give life color, and do battle with the shadows. Elizabeth Leopard's "The Colors of Love" is just one of the many poems that offer insight and texture to our experience:

The colors of Love are seen in the fabric  
of life;  
God provides the canvas; mankind adds  
the color. (92)

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**CHRISTIANS AND A LAND CALLED HOLY: HOW WE CAN FOSTER JUSTICE, PEACE AND HOPE**, by Charles P. Lutz and Robert O. Smith. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006. Pp. 168. \$15.00 (paper).

The subtitle of Charles Lutz and Robert Smith's book aptly states its purpose. This is a superb little "how to" book for Christians who

want to help bring hope, peace, and justice to the Holy Land. It would be appropriate for adult Sunday School classes and church small groups, as well as useful to college students and professionals who are trying to figure out how to be involved constructively in the Israeli and Palestinian conflict.

Smith and Lutz each write background chapters followed by the Appendix, "Whose Land Is It?" (contributed by Sulpician priest, Ronald D. Witherup, S.S.). The meat of this guidebook to religious involvement and social action, however, is chapter 4, "The Call to Action," and the resources, notes, and indexes that bring the book to a close. All together, the practical guidelines of chapter 4 and the concluding resource material comprise almost half the book. The book stands or falls on these pages—and it stands strong.

Even so, the first three chapters are not to be skimmed lightly, since they give readers essential background information and confidence to understand the region's complex his-

tory and take just steps that foster peace. Beginning at the beginning with the covenant between God and Abraham, the authors take the reader quickly and carefully through contemporary Jewish claims to the biblical *Eretz Yisrael*, the messianic Davidic promise, and the catastrophic destructions of Israel and depopulation of Jews in 586 B.C.E., 70 C.E., and 135 C.E.

The authors point out that from the time of Jesus until today, individual Christians have had a variety of attitudes toward the land where Jesus walked (ranging from apathy to romanticism), but that imperial Christendom never wavered in its lust to possess the Holy Land, which it did from the Constantinian era till 638 C.E. and again from 1099 to 1187. Except for the eighty-eight-year period of Crusader occupation, Palestine (Rome's name for this region of the world) knew its greatest peace and religious freedom from 638 to 1917 C.E. under 1300 years of Islamic rule.

The Muslim claim to the land focuses on Je-

rusalem, and specifically on the Harem Al-Sharif where the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock memorialize the site where Abraham offered his son as a sacrifice to God as well as the place from which Mohammad ascended to heaven (it is debated whether it was in body or spirit) and led all of the prophets in prayer, including Jesus. With such authority, Mohammad is able to clarify previously ambiguous revelations and correct earlier Jewish and Christian teachings that had become corrupted by time and human frailties, thus establishing himself as the final prophet with all the truth necessary for the salvation of the world.

The authors touch on the relevance of the Dreyfus Affair; Theodor Herzl's seminal book, *The Jewish State*; different types of Zionism; the Balfour Declaration (1917); and the Shoah's influence on the founding of the state of Israel. Prior to all of these events, however, Palestinian national identity was already growing and appears most recently in the

Fateh (1958) and Hamas (1987) political parties.

At this moment in history, the authors confess appropriately that "we North American Christians must hold ourselves accountable... because we are complicit in this new era of Palestinian oppression." The authors welcome the emerging divisions within Western Christianity as progress toward breaking "the theopolitical" captivity of the American church. No longer are the only voices heard those of Tim LaHaye, Pat Robertson, and John Hagee. Today, one hears the countervailing voices of Richard Mouw, Donald Wagner, Gary Burge, Steven Sizer, and Barbara Rossing. And even though Christian Zionism is still more politically powerful, the national and international media carry stories about Christian Peacemaker Teams, and the Presbyterian Church USA and the United Church of Christ's work for selective Israeli divestment.

The CPT, UCC, and PC(USA) are examples of Western Christians finding a way to encour-

age peace, justice, and hope among Palestinians and Israelis. Pastor Mitri Raheb of the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem (West Bank Palestine) preaches to all who will listen, “We are not asking for more [church or denominational] statements. We are asking for action.”

Lutz and Smith answer Raheb’s plea with four categories of actions, each filled with practical suggestions for American Christians to nurture peace and justice in the Holy Land. Being well informed is, of course, of the first order, but seems impossible: the news media is market driven; personal and institutional bias is inevitable; those in power spin the news for their own ends; and “almost 70% of the journalists serving the international media [in Israel] are Jewish or married to Israeli Jews.” No wonder the national media seem so one-sided!

Undaunted, the authors identify, describe, and give the web addresses for two dozen internet sources of news from nongovernmental organizations around the world and from organizations on both sides of the Green Line. Moreover, in the Resources, they identify more than fifty websites for news and analysis

as well as offering an extensive annotated bibliography for books and videos. Of course they miss some sources, e.g., “The Iron Wall,” a brilliantly illuminating documentary by Mohammed Alatar, but this book is a gold mine of sources.

Lutz and Smith offer practical guidance for Christian prayer and political involvement—not for or against Israel or Palestine—but for an inclusive peace and justice. Their final set of recommendations is again wonderfully practical (e.g., including the names and websites of tour group operators who specialize in “politicized tourism”), even offering sage precautionary advice to avoid lengthy arrival and departure interviews at Ben Gurion International Airport. Since every public act is political, visiting Israel and Palestine cannot help but be political; therefore, make it count. Working for justice, peace, and hope in the Holy Land is not otherworldly nor Pollyanna-ish. It is the faithful response of every Christian to God’s call.

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