



**SYMBOLISM IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL: MEANING, MYSTERY, COMMUNITY**, by Craig R. Koester. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995. Pp. 300 including bibliography, biblical, subject, and modern authors indices.

How is one to begin? This common question is very significant to a writer who has selected the Gospel of John as a subject for exploration. Its kaleidoscopic nature leads individuals to view it from different angles and to see different things. The spiral method of presentation makes it an inviting Gospel while embedding formidable interpretative challenges.

How is one to proceed? Dr. Koester, a recognized Johannine scholar, has chosen to focus on symbolism. It is an effective and constructive approach because the author does not limit his treatment within the confines of one discipline but incorporates literary and socio-historical matters and pays special attention to Jesus' death in its theological aspects. The approach enables him to distinguish and explore the interaction between various aspects of meaning in Johannine symbols. It avoids reducing multifaceted symbols to flat propositional statements and guards against suggestions that they are indeterminate and can mean anything the interpreter wishes. What is the result of his focus? This interpretative study of the entire Gospel stays on course and, though detailed, keeps central symbols and issues front and center. It provides both breadth and depth to one's understanding. Once read, the volume can remain a valuable resource to the three audiences for whom the study is intended: biblical scholars and theologians interested in the Fourth Gospel and symbolic language, students who have studied the Gospel for years, and the church. It surely will provide new energy to those who find John's Gospel daunting because of the multi-layered quality of its language.

Professor Koester is well versed in the Johannine Problem. The Gospel was written, he concludes, for believers, but was forged in a context of dispute with the non-Christian world (186). The age in which it was written offered a world in which crucifixion remained a brutal and vital part of life. The proclamation of a crucified Messiah could easily arouse contempt long after Jesus' ministry had ended. No wonder that the Gospel sought to create a frame of reference which could disclose the transcendent significance of Jesus' death. Obviously, tensions of various kinds arose.

One mark of tension, the tension between needing to maintain boundaries with the outside and allowing for and seeking the inclusion of newcomers, is thought to characterize Johannine Christianity throughout this period. Chapter 21 was almost certainly added late in the community's history (252). John 13-17 may also have been added at a fairly late stage in the Gospel's composition. The Johannine Epistles, written after the completion of the Fourth Gospel, are considered to manifest a similar tension.

The author, a Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, does not assume or preclude the existence of a Signs Source in his discussion of symbolic actions (chapter 3). Whatever the decision about the existence of such a source, signs are recognized as having a privileged place in the account of Jesus' ministry. That they occupied such a position does not

preclude their being misunderstood. Miracles, even then, had no universally acknowledged meaning. The same act could be understood in diverse and often conflicting ways by people who viewed it from different perspectives. How then does one interpret miracles? Can ambiguities be uncovered? The author confronts such issues and offers positive ways in which one can understand this aspect of Jesus' ministry.

The preface and chapter 1, "Symbol, Meaning and Mystery," provide basics for understanding the entire volume and the

author's specific perspectives. He rather quickly challenges the idea that Johannine Christianity was an introverted community whose symbolic language would have been clear to insiders but opaque to outsiders. The symbolism, he contends, was accessible to a wide spectrum of readers. In the discussion of symbolism itself, he wisely moves from a definition of symbolism in its most general sense to a more specific consideration. In its most general sense, symbolism is something that stands for something else. In the more specific sense, "a symbol is an image, action or a person that is understood to have transcendent significance" (4). Elaborating this further, *images* are things that can be perceived by the senses, such as light and darkness. The *action* that functions symbolically in this Gospel includes non-miraculous action like washing feet as well as miraculous signs like turning water into wine. The *person* who makes God known is Jesus; those he meets represent types of belief and unbelief. The inclusion of images, actions, and representative figures enrich the very careful explorations since they too convey something of transcendent significance. Symbols are important since they span the chasm between that which is "from above" and what is "from below" without collapsing the distinction.

Professor Koester's careful distinction between core and supporting symbols proves to be useful throughout the initial and six succeeding chapters. The titles of the chapters, beginning with chapter 2, are: Symbolic and Representative Figures, Symbolic Actions, Light and Darkness, Water, The Crucifixion, and Symbol and Community. Core symbols are shown to occur most often in the most significant contexts in the Gospel narratives. They contribute the most to the Gospel's message. In a core symbol such as light, the image of darkness offers a counterpart. In such contexts, day and night and sight and blindness play supporting roles in their relationship to light. Core symbols usually stand at the center of a narrative. Supporting images in a motif often remain in the background. As one would surmise, core symbols convey transcendent realities most clearly.

The distinction with respect to symbols enables the author to bring new clarity and meaning to such descriptions as "by night" (3:2) and to such a difficult passage as 7:37-39 with its language about the flowing of "rivers of living water."

One encounters some repetitiveness in the analysis of symbolism as the author leads one through the chapters in his focus on "meaning, mystery, and community." The repetition never seemed to get in the way for the reviewer. It actually offered a necessary context for the conclusions which were shared.

The final section is entitled, "Postscript: Johannine Symbolism and Christian Tradition." It may be termed a postscript, but it offers more than a simple supplemental addition to a written or printed document. It moves beyond the average postscript to challenge the reader to re-examine former conclusions with respect to numerical, geographical, and sacramental

symbolism. Do the 153 fish mentioned in chapter 21 have symbolic significance? Probably not. Has the evangelist structured some aspects of the narrative in groups of seven? Yes. Do the geographical physical places convey something of transcendent or representative significance? If so, how does one arrive at a conclusion? In considering the significance of particular sites, the author suggests that a connection be found between literary developments in the Gospel and possible allusions to traditions associated with those places (262).

The discussion on sacramental symbolism is obviously the most challenging and interesting of the three topics considered in the postscript. Those scholars who see sacramental allusions behind every verbal bush in the language field called the Gospel of John are confronted with careful discussions that may lead to re-assessments. Whether or not one agrees with all the author's conclusions at this point, the questions asked and the opinions expressed are vital in our age of new liturgical suggestions and new examinations of old traditions.

Professor Koester is the author of a book and numerous articles on the Gospel of John. It shows in the careful way in which he presents his exposition. This is a first-

rate volume. It is a rewarding discussion of symbols and a very useful commentary on the Gospel. I plan to turn to this study again and again. My students will be asked to do the same.

Merlin H. Hoops  
Trinity Lutheran Seminary  
Columbus, Ohio

**REMEMBERING THE CHRISTIAN PAST**, by Robert L. Wilken. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995. Pp. 180. \$16.99 (paper).

This is a collection of eight essays which have appeared earlier as articles or presentations elsewhere. Robert Wilken, the author, is the William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of the History of Christianity at the University of Virginia and undoubtedly one of the foremost patristic scholars today. The essays, in typical Wilken fashion, do not merely address scholarly questions of the early church but speak directly to the intellectual and theological debates of our time.

In his presidential address to the American Academy of Religion in 1989 he asks the question, "Who Will Speak *for* the Religious Traditions?" He suggests to the AAR that scholarship on living religious traditions cannot exist in isolation from the communities that are the bearers of these traditions. Today's intellectual climate discourages or prohibits the scholar from speaking as a member of a religious community. He insists that "rationalism is not synonymous with detachment." In "Religious Pluralism and Early Christian Thought," Wilken chides those who have just discovered that we live in a pluralistic society, and he recounts the numerous challenges of other religions from the beginning. He marshals evidence from Symmachus, Porphyry, Plotinus, Celsus, and above all, Origen. His conclusion is that today's preoccupation with pluralism is often driven by the notion that all religions are equal since they all are culturally conditioned, and therefore none can bear the "truth," whereas in antiquity the Christian conviction was based upon revelation, a community (the like of which had no precedent), and affection for God. It is a good essay for those who are intimidated in their witness by the claims of "pluralism."

“No Other Gods” speaks to today’s practical atheism or secularism which results from a “systematic dismembering and trashing of our culture” that is not accidental but intentional. The ferocity of the current assault on the legacy (memory) of Christian culture has brought us a new clarity of vision: Christianity is communal; there can be no Christian society where there is no respect for the religious life; it is not enthusiasm but dogma that differentiates a Christian from a pagan society; and there must be greater knowledge and respect for the Christian intellectual tradition. Christian faith is concerned not simply with values or feelings or even “beliefs,” but with truth. Wilken mines the writings of Origen and Augustine in his critique of theism, in which the concreteness of history (memory) plays an important role.

“Not a Solitary God: The Triune God of the Bible” reviews the familiar material and controversies from the early church in a new and fresh way. Like the other essays in this volume, Wilken’s constant awareness of contemporary discussion in theology is apparent. The problem with heresies then and now, Wilken suggests, is that theologians formulate theories without reference to Jesus Christ; or as Tertullian said, without God’s “economy,” meaning salvation history. Hilary of Poitiers wrote in his *De Trinitate* that since the resurrection everything (including theology) was transformed. When the Arian Eunomius objected to the names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit on the grounds that biblical language required updating, he was answered by Gregory of Nyssa, who insisted that the traditional terms described relationships, and one cannot rewrite the Bible simply to suit a fancy, which in this case was also Arian. Basically the doctrine of the Trinity carries with it the teaching of salvation.

“*In novissimis diebus: Biblical Promise, Jewish Hopes, and Early Christian Exegesis*” is in response to a contemporary Jewish critic of Christian exegesis who asks why Christians do not validate the Jewish right to the land of Israel on the basis of biblical

promises, but instead “spiritualize” the promises. Wilken demonstrates how the phrase “in these last days” played a key hermeneutical role in early Christian thinking, and how a christological rather than political or economic understanding informed their exegesis. Using primarily Isa 2:2-4, he shows how a dozen or more of the early commentators understood prophecy in terms of Christ, as Jewish writers also did messianically. In light of the Christian conviction that the messiah had come, the prophecies had been fulfilled, so that the “spiritual” sense *was* the historical sense.

“The Lives of the Saints and the Pursuit of Virtue” speaks of Christian hagiography and the significance of moral example (as contrasted with precept) in character formation. These collections of the lives of saints, including those of many women, began to grow in the fourth century. Palladius: “I must commend the courageous women to whom God granted struggles equal to those of men.” In “Loving God with a Holy Passion,” Wilken demonstrates the criticism of the Fathers for Stoic *apatheia* or dispassionate disposition. Affections are necessary for the virtuous life. The four cardinal Christian passions are desire, delight, fear, and distress. Knowledge and faith are impossible at a distance; they demand a relationship. Much of this material comes from Maximus the Confessor.

“Memory and the Christian Intellectual Life” is about the role of tradition and reason in theology. He is sharply critical of

those who insist on autonomy as a mark of rationality, that is, freedom from the constraints of inherited institutions or beliefs. He says that these “invite a willful amnesia, a self-imposed affliction that would rob our lives of depth and direction.” Authority has to do not with power but with trustworthiness. The Christian intellectual tradition is inescapably historical. Without such memory our intellectual life is impoverished, ephemeral, and vacillating. There simply can be no such life without reference to the past.

All of these essays are grounded in Wilken’s thorough grasp of the texts and of his unsurpassed knowledge of the ancient church. This, together with his critical yet sympathetic understanding of the church today, makes these essays directly relevant to theological issues which are in debate. His lucid and lively style makes theology interesting to read. We hope this volume will also serve to introduce readers to his other equally fascinating and authoritative (trustworthy) studies.

Carl A. Volz  
Luther Seminary  
St. Paul, Minnesota

**DOING THEOLOGY IN CONTEXT: SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES**, Theology and Praxis Volume One, edited by John W. de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis; Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Phillip, 1994. Pp. 236, including index.

Many people throughout the world have focused upon South Africa because of its heretical system of apartheid. South African theology has also been in the spotlight as churches have struggled to combat apartheid. Now that the system is illegal, even though its implications remain, the dynamics which have shaped South African theology for a long time have changed. Many are wondering what shape South African theology will take and what issues it will address.

At the same time, the significance of doing theology in context has been gaining momentum. Doing theology in context is no longer conceived in terms of liberation theology alone. It is increasingly clear that every part of the world must interpret the scriptures and do theology in ways that are unique, particular, and specific to itself. Both these issues lie at the foundation of this book.

The book is a compendium of nineteen essays, written by eighteen South African theologians who come from various traditions and perspectives. It is divided into four parts. The first one is concerned with introductory issues and consists of three articles dealing with the nature, necessity, and task of theology; the Bible and theology; and theology and faith. The discussion in these essays is concisely presented, with each essay comprising ten pages.

The second part deals with the doctrine of God. It consists of four essays. The first three essays deal individually with the three persons of the trinity, while the fourth puts them together in the discussion of the doctrine of the trinity. Though discussed in summary fashion, the essays highlight major historical developments of the doctrines. They are not very evaluative, and a clear effort to contextualize them to a specifically South African setting is evident. This is not accomplished, however, without difficulties. For example the doctrine of God does not reflect a black, African concept of God at all. It is based on western philosophy. The consideration of the person and the work of Christ in the model of liberation theology, in which the death of Jesus is

conceived chiefly as God suffering with the oppressed, also hits a snag. When Jesus dies, it is God who dies, apparently to get a “hands-on-experience” of suffering. But since it is God who raises Jesus from the dead, resurrection clearly presents an unresolved incoherence in the suffering model because it contradicts the notion of the ever-suffering God. Another controversial idea in the discussion of the doctrine of the trinity states that: “God is a community of the father, son and spirit” (85). While I applaud the effort to emphasize the necessity of human community, I wonder whether it is necessary to base it on this kind of notion which jeopardizes the unity of God.

The third part concerns creation and redemption. It has five essays on the

doctrines of creation, humanity, redemption, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Even though written by different authors, they have much in common. They all have a global perspective, taking the tone which is dominant in the World Council of Church’s discussions on missions and ecclesiology. All authors use the Bible intensively, with a simple reading even though they clearly reflect awareness of the tough interpretive issues in biblical studies. They are socially oriented; they even explain eschatology in sociological and psychological dimensions, insisting that it is now! The futuristic focus on Jesus coming back as a judge, as the church confesses, is irrelevant. The theoretical basis of their epistemology is essentially western and includes the thought of Newton, Descartes, Moltmann, Barth, Ebeling, Berkhof, and Bultmann. There is a clear lack of African philosophical perspective.

The fourth part deals with the various theologies in South Africa. There are essays on African theologies, confessing theologies, black theology, liberation theology, feminism, kairos theology, and the challenge posed by the plurality of faiths. The last essay about pluralism is a good synthesis of not only this part, but also of the whole book. It demonstrates how the world has been pluralistic from the beginning and how the Bible and the church have always been pluralistic. Therefore it calls for respectful tolerance and dialogue between the different religions which are so much a part of the world, as well as recognition of the differing theological perspectives and attitudes that these religions provide. The theologies presented in these essays are all alive and well, vibrant at different levels, and have global affiliates. The discussions are informative, especially the unique South African models like the kairos theology. Others are stimulating, and provoke rethinking how we are doing theology in our respective places. Most challenging is the one on feminism. The author asks why racism is regarded as the worst evil, while the churches worldwide have not been so resolute in the fight against sexism. She speaks very boldly, and presents facts which are very disturbing to most of us who are male, who may not like to discover how insensitive we are to the plight of women. She does not equate the liberation and equality of women with the ordination of women. But she focuses more on the plight of most women in everyday life. For example, she observes that at least one woman is raped every 83 seconds in South Africa alone! More than 13,000 rape cases involving children under the age of 14 were reported between 1986 and 1993 to the South African Child Protection Unit. Despite these facts, only one out of 86 people in a study had ever heard a single sermon on rape. She challenges the church to explain what this silence communicates. She is also very bold on another front. She confesses, as a white woman, to the oppression of millions of black women by white women who have employed them as maids. She is the only one who identifies herself

with those who have benefited by apartheid. The other authors, most of whom are white males, identify themselves with the oppressed, and so make no confessions.

In general, the book has several good aspects. It consists of broad-based systematic theology, which intentionally tries to be contextual. The essays are very well informed by western theological thinking. There is a clear sense of feeling that South Africa is changing. Apartheid is not an issue for attack any more. There is a new theology, called the theology of reconstruction, that is emerging, and it is alluded to by several authors.

Several shortcomings should also be mentioned. One, the new theology, the theology of reconstruction, deserves a more complete treatment. Two, the book is intended to be an introduction to theology for people who have had no contact with theological discussions, but unless the students of theology in South Africa come with prior knowledge of most of the theological discussions it will be a threatening one, since most of the theories, concepts, terminologies, and discussions are for graduating students. The discussions are only mentioned, without explanation (e.g., the Cappadocians, the Stoics, docetic heresy, etc.). Three, it seems most of the authors are white. It is very frustrating to see that in the current spirit of reconstruction, it is the mi-

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nority whites who are dominating the crusade for contextualizing theology. There are probably three or less non-whites among the eighteen authors. Even though there are a significant number of black South African theologians who have made an impact in the world theological debate, they are excluded here. They appear only in a few footnotes and very few bibliographical entries. As a result, the whole tone of the book is rooted in western ways of thinking (white), and the reality of the life of black South Africans is barely in the picture. For example, the independent churches, which are more significant in South Africa than most other African countries, are completely out of view, despite the note in the last essay that they have a significant role to play if the gospel is going to make an impact on deep-rooted African beliefs. Even though I cannot claim any competence in the South African situation; the book sounds to me to be rooted in an urban South African context. The discussions would have been much enhanced by more representation of non-white authors and more reflection on the real life situation of blacks, the majority, from an insider. In all the essays, full use of technical terms is made with a complete lack of black African imprint. Finally, there is a clear sense of the fact that apartheid is a past issue with a consequent attack on nationalism.

Fidon Mwombeki  
Luther Seminary  
St. Paul, Minnesota

**AMERICAN CONGREGATIONS.** Vol. 1, *Portraits of Twelve Religious Communities*. Pp. 723. Vol 2, *New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*. Pp. 301. Edited by James P. Wind and James W. Lewis. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994.

People long “to make a difference”; pastors do, too. With congregations as our turf, we suffer the anxiety of influence. Fervently desiring to influence congregations, pastors sometimes,

yes, too often, do violence to these same congregations—usually knowing not what they do. The violence is of the garden variety “ugly American” kind. We clumsily fail to meet and treat congregations as bearers of a rich local heritage and thereby violate their integrity as “historically extended, socially embodied” cultures, Dorothy Bass’s formulation (2:174). Though not their stated intention, these volumes can help mend this tear in clergy decorum and other maladies as well.

In vol. 1 seventeen American religious historians in the “social history” genre have competently researched and engagingly written the portraits of twelve congregations. Readers will move from English Puritans in New Haven, to German Jews in Cincinnati, to Black Methodists in Baltimore, to Lebanese Muslims in northern Canada, to Jesus Movement refugees in Orange County. This is deep diving, mind you, where beauty abounds beneath the surface, not Internet style “surfing.”

One assumption, simple yet profound, guides and unites all of the “portraits” in vol. 1 as well as the “new perspectives” in vol. 2: “American religion has been, and by and large remains, distinctively congregational” (1:1). This basic assumption seems unremarkable except for the fact that the teaching and learning of the history of religion in America has been undertaken primarily in ways other than through the disciplined study of congregational life. The intellectual traditions for the study of American religion in both seminaries and universities have focused on historical studies of religious movements, biographical portraits of exceptional leaders and spiritual heroes, and confessional and denominational histories. The life of congregations has been curiously absent. One could only speculate about the kind of prejudice that might fuel such an intellectual *faux pas*.

These volumes, growing out of the Congregational History Project at the University of Chicago Divinity School, decisively recognize congregations for what they have always been: “the basic unit of religion in America” (1:3). The centrality of the “congregational thesis” (my designation) for the interpretation of American religious history brings a new focus through a richly textured localization to other more traditional interpretive themes, like revivalism, social gospel, mainline religion, and funda-

mentalism. The congregational angle likewise provides a new locus of ethnographic radiance for the conventional themes of general American social history like urbanization, suburbanization, frontier expansion, native exploitation, slavery, universal suffrage, and professionalization.

Various subsidiary assumptions, residing—sometimes hiding(?)—in the background, lend particular hues to the portraits of these interpreters. They desire to tell “another story” of congregations besides the one about private preoccupations and public irrelevance. They explore the religious dimensions of the pluralization of the American landscape. They probe the adequacy of the thesis that Americans are becoming increasingly secularized. They demonstrate that struggles over the shape of leadership, a buzzword nowadays, have long been a part of American religious cultures. They show that Americans, while often tempted toward an individualistic atomism, also intentionally fashion institutions and other variously patterned networks of interaction through which they exercise responsible behavior. This reviewer wishes that the authors had paid closer attention to the central role that scriptural interpretation plays in American congregations. Unfortunately, there were neither biblical interpreters nor practicing



pastors among the conversants that led to these volumes.

Vol. 2 presents an entirely different genre of critical reflection on American congregational life. Here eight well known authors (four historians, two theologians, an ethicist, and a sociologist of religion) propose different angles of vision for the study of congregations and occasionally do so in conscious tandem with the historical portraits in vol. 1. Despite the conventional neglect of congregations in the academic discipline of the history of American religion, *American Congregations*, self-consciously, is an heir to a heritage of congregational studies. The “Introduction” to vol. 2 by Wind and Lewis almost by itself redeems the price of this volume. They identify nine or ten moments in the history of congregational studies beginning with the social gospel reformers and the 1920s “sociology of the congregation” propounded by H. Paul Douglass through the congregational consultants and religious sociologists of the seventies and eighties up to the more recent ethnographic styled projects associated with people like James Hopewell, Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley, and others.

E. Brooks Holifield of Emory University opens the collection with a very helpful map of four major forms of congregational life that correspond to four historical eras in American history: the comprehensive congregation, the devotional congregation, the social congregation, and the participatory congregation. Following Holifield’s provocative typology, the innovative sociologist of religion R. Stephen Warner argues a thesis of contemporary *de facto* congregationalism and the declining significance of denominationalism. Along the way he attends to various activities that congregations presently perform, like worship, education, mission, stewardship, and fellowship—the latter, argues Warner, being “the master function” of congregations in our pluralistic society. There’s much to ponder and some to dispute, which is, after all, what ought to happen.

Theologian Langdon Gilkey presents a refreshing exploration of “the presence of the holy” as the specifically religious center in congregations. While stimulating in many respects, his analysis is also conventional fare, employing the somewhat tattered, Troeltschian ecclesial types emphasizing sacramental presence, proclaimed word, and sectarian perfectionism. If you struggle with the problem of dividing the private from the public, then Martin Marty’s analysis is for you. He reviews critically the two reigning paradigms for where congregations fit in the public-private “thing,” and then argues his own proposal, which capitalizes on the concept of “meeting,” borrowed from Martin Buber. He finds in congregational life a dynamic meeting of private and public spheres and postulates that congregations represent that meeting where public religious life begins. This is a fruitful trajectory and as such merits the kinds of modifications that could accrue from a socially mindful theology of

creation and a sociologically informed notion of civil society.

Dorothy Bass and Don Browning both explore ways in which congregations mediate between traditional religious heritages and present contextual realities. Noted Roman Catholic historian Jay Dolan offers an analysis of three forms of leadership that stand in conjunction with three historical eras. Ethicist Robert Franklin delves into the culture of black congregations and finds there a matrix of leadership focusing on preaching and consisting of consensus builders, crusaders, commanders, and campaigners.

These two volumes ought to find their way into the reading hands of parish pastors and

into the course syllabi of seminary classrooms. Many have been rightfully promoting a paradigm shift toward missional congregations. These volumes can help pastors and seminary students be mindful of the realities that paradigm shifts bring in congregational life and perhaps also minimize the violence that can accompany the zeal admittedly needed for such shifts.

Gary M. Simpson  
Luther Seminary  
St. Paul, Minnesota

*Spiritual Life in the Early Church: The Witness of Acts and Ephesians*, by Bonnie Thurston. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993. Pp. 115 (paper).

There are several layers of discussion in Thurston's book. The author discusses spiritual life in the early church and its implications for the contemporary church in the first and final chapters. In between, Thurston gives compact descriptions of spiritual life in the book of Acts and in the letter to the Ephesians.

In the very brief first chapter Thurston handily describes what she means by spirituality. "What a person does with what that person believes is 'spirituality.'" She links this understanding with life in the early church, for early believers put into practice what they believed, responding to a world filled with the presence of God and the risen Christ.

This general introduction should be helpful for anyone seeking a biblical base for spirituality. Later, however, the author carries on a more technical discussion of life in Acts, and then in the Ephesian letter. This longer section of the book, heavily footnoted, might appeal more to scholarly readers, for it presupposes a degree of familiarity with the issues in current scholarship.

Thurston uncovers four spiritual practices common to Acts and Ephesians. These not only link the two books, but they also prepare the way for her concluding chapter. And that one, like the discussion that opens the book, is especially helpful for anyone, pastoral or lay, who is interested in matters of biblical spirituality.

The author frames the discussion this way:

The spiritual fire, practical pluralism, communal commitment, and holistic understanding of the early Christians were worked out in what they did to manifest their belief. Three practices stand out as definitive of the early church: prayer, the Lord's Supper, and devotion to the name of Jesus. (93)

This summarizes not only what Thurston sees as the driving impulse in Acts and Ephesians, it is also the spiritual energy which she believes ought to inspire the con-

temporary church as it seeks its own form of spirituality today.

Robert M. Brusick  
Luther Seminary  
St. Paul, Minnesota

*The Mystery and the Passion: A Homiletic Reading of the Gospel Traditions*, by David Buttrick. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992. Pp. 246 + x.

While casually thumbing the pages of David Buttrick's recent book, I noticed that a section of the Epilogue bore the heading "Atonement Now." Having just recently read Gerhard Forde's *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), I found my interest piqued; might Buttrick's discussion bear any relation to Forde's very helpful treatment of atonement as actual event? To find out, I read Buttrick's book.

Buttrick states: "The problem for us is a 'how' problem. Granted that once upon a time Christ died and was raised, that divine absolution has been declared, *how* does saving mercy reach out of the past to our lives?" (228). The answers given by Protestants and Roman Catholics—preaching and faith for the former, church and sacraments for the latter—are unsatisfactory in isolation, thinks Buttrick. The former tends toward disembodied docetism; the latter toward ecclesial triumphalism. Buttrick seeks to steer between Scylla and Charybdis, asserting that "in and through our brokenness, grace is at work," as, "in and through the church, the saving message is spoken in stumbling words, and bread is broken by trembling hands, and we are, to our astonishment, being saved-now" (230).

Buttrick rightly chooses 'both/and' rather than 'either/or', but *how* does atonement occur now, in his view? Buttrick's answer is that Jesus Christ effects our atonement by functioning as a saving symbol of God's love and mercy. "The mode of Christ's saving power is as a symbol in social consciousness" (232). Anyone who has read Buttrick's magisterial handbook, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), will immediately recognize that Buttrick, in referring to symbols in social consciousness, is articulating his understanding of preaching as the shaping of a faith-world in congregational consciousness by means of images and symbols. Buttrick devotes about half of the present volume to a homiletic reading of the scriptural traditions concerning Jesus' resurrection and passion, seeking to discern the symbolic-homiletical significance of the biblical writers' depictions of Jesus.

But does Buttrick's understanding of the gospel actually offer a gift or does it merely make one more demand? Buttrick states that "the good news that the church is commissioned to declare is not only mercy for our sin, but an invitation to join the new humanity, God's new order in the midst of a broken, sinful world" (227). For Buttrick, the gospel is "news of a new order under the risen Christ: Come join God's coming new world" (228).

The trouble with this is not hard to see. If the gospel is just an invitation to take some action, to answer an invitation, to join a new humanity, and it doesn't actually give me the power to do so, then it is just the same old law, not the gospel. Here it is clear that Forde and Buttrick are not really talking about the same thing at all. For atonement to be actual, there has to be an actual ending to the divine wrath. The voice of the law has actually to be silenced. This takes place when the forgiveness of sin is proclaimed to me—now, in the present. But with absolution comes death—my death as a moral agent. If absolution is unconditional, I die as one who might *do* anything. But I receive new life precisely as a creature who can now receive from God, can now trust God to be creator, can now expect all good from God. What is needed is not a symbol, an image, a representation of God's mercifulness. What is needed is just *mercy!* Mercy done to me by God in Jesus Christ, i.e., in the living Word of proclamation.

So finally I found Buttrick's book to be less helpful than I had hoped, for it takes social transformation (*à la* H. R. Niebuhr's conversionist motif), rather than the movement through death to resurrection, to be the fundamental trajectory of Christian experience. Participation in

sinful self is seen as needing to die, through baptism and the preaching of the absolving word, can law and gospel be properly distinguished.

(One editorial curiosity: The subtitle appears on the cover as “A Homiletic Reading of the Gospel Traditions,” while the title page has “A Homiletic Reading of the Biblical Traditions.”)

John H. Reinschmidt  
Luther Seminary  
St. Paul, Minnesota

*Selling Out America's Children: How America Puts Profits before Values—And What Parents Can Do*, by David Walsh. Minneapolis: Fairview Press, 1994. Pp. 172.

A blurb on the cover quotes Bill Moyers, “I urge every parent to read this book.” I affirm Moyers’ urging and add that everyone concerned about the impact of media on our children and on ourselves should read it. Walsh, a psychologist at Fairview Hospital in Minneapolis, has done extensive study of the influence of television and other media such as movies and video games on the development of attitudes and values, especially among children. The result of those studies is deeply troubling.

Walsh believes that even those who lack parenting skills generally want what is best for their children and try their best to be good parents. He is convinced, on the other hand, that producers of commercial television programs for children have a significantly different motive, to make money. From his perspective, commercial television exists to provide an audience for advertisers, who have learned that three ways of capturing and holding audiences are humor, violence, and sex. To attract and hook more viewers, the humor often becomes vulgar, the violence more intense, and the sex more explicit.

Walsh is especially concerned about violence in children’s programming and about the values taught and caught via TV advertising that deliberately seeks to implant product images in the minds of even preschool children whose “nag factor” on parents gives them an immense buying power. Contrary to Jesus’ teaching “our life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15), “what kids see on television conveys the idea that the key to happiness is money and the material possessions it buys.”

In addition to teaching that “happiness is equated with having things” Walsh believes that television conveys “value messages” that promote violence as “exciting and glamorous,” affirms “rewards without work, “encourages selfishness, and seldom mentions “social values like being helpful or being concerned for others.” In addition “aggression and disrespect are portrayed as humorous and attractive” (52-54). He cites a study that estimates that “the average child in the United States will receive about 45,000 messages about sex from television during their formative years” and points out that soap opera sex occurs “between unmarried people 94 percent of the time” and that even on prime time television “references to sexual activity are generally between unmarried people.” He notes:

It is ironic when we consider the furor caused in many communities by controversy around school-based sex education classes. Some parents become absolutely livid when the possibility is raised that their children will be taught about sexuality as part of a health curriculum. Yet there is seldom any similar storm or protest about the sex education our children are getting from exploitative advertising and television programs. (94)

A strength of this book beyond its perceptive analysis of the problem is its specific recommendations for change. For example, Walsh argues for a “massive campaign to educate America’s parents about what violent entertainment is doing to our children in the same way that this country has educated its citizens about the dangers of cigarette smoking” (78). He also has specific suggestions for parents and concludes with a section on “What We Can Do As Members of Society.” With full awareness of First Amendment issues, Walsh recommends “the establishment of a cabinet-level office whose mission is to safeguard our children.” This “Department of Children’s Well-Being” (154) would be responsible for “organizing under one umbrella the offices

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regarding children that are currently scattered throughout other departments.” Walsh advocates legislation, similar to that protecting the environment from pollution, requiring a children’s impact statement on products and entertainment to ensure that the messages sent to our children are not harmful to them. “We are appropriately outraged to find someone dumping toxic material into a river. Yet every day we allow profiteers to exploit our children by dumping toxic material into their minds” (155).

The final word is an affirmation of good programming for children and a call for “additional children’s programming on noncommercial stations.” While noting a saying from the Iroquois Nation—“In our every deliberation, we must consider the effect of our decision on the next seven generations”—Walsh deplores the fact that

The driving force behind most of the messages we send to our children is profit. As a result, many unhealthy values are shaped and reinforced. The question of how this affects our children has been largely ignored in the context of our larger society, because in the realm of the market place, it is an irrelevant question. The only matter of concern in the market place is profitability. Consequently as a society we are not considering the effects of our decisions on “the next seven generations.” (158-59)

With Walsh I believe that “The time has come to change that. The time has

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come to reclaim America’s children.”

Lowell O. Erdahl  
Saint Paul Area Synod, ELCA

St. Paul, Minnesota

*Preaching to a TV Generation: The Sermon in the Electronic Age*, by Michael Rogness. Lima, OH: CSS Publishing, 1994. Pp. 113.

Convinced that preaching in the church has fallen on hard times because the current generation of church-goers have been heavily influenced by television, Michael Rogness has written a tract on the sermon in the electronic age. It is not that the sermon is outdated or irrelevant, he asserts. The situation is due to a shorter attention span induced, in large part, by the vast influence of television in our culture.

One result, it appears, is that listeners are inattentive or bored with sermons as they are usually delivered. Rogness, Professor of Homiletics at Luther Seminary, asserts that part of the blame lies with preachers, for many are continuing to proclaim the word in ways that are suited to an older, preTV age.

If one agrees with this analysis, then Rogness's book is very helpful. If people are no longer accustomed to lengthy, linear oral presentations, then it is not likely they will get very much from sermons that are prepared and delivered that way. Rogness calls for sermons that are still faithful to text and tradition; but he insists they be more visual in their impact.

The author concludes that well-prepared and engagingly told stories are the key to preaching to a TV generation, and he gives many lively examples how this might be done. Stories must, he cautions, be integrated with the text they accompany rather than be told for their own sake. It is essential that sermons be prepared with a firm sense of clarity and theme and then delivered in an engaging manner. Otherwise the preached word will fall flat and perpetuate what Rogness calls "brick counting."

Rogness may be on to something here. If his recommendations are taken seriously, there might indeed be an upgrading of preaching. One wonders, though, if television really is more interesting than preaching. If it were, why do the people pictured on the cover of the book look so bored and glazed? That photo is enough to make one question if contemporary television is more exciting than traditional preaching.

Robert M. Brusic  
Luther Seminary  
St. Paul, Minnesota