

Reviews



LUTHER AND THE STORIES OF GOD: BIBLICAL NARRATIVES AS A FOUNDATION FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING, by Robert Kolb. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012. Pp. 188. \$21.99 (paper).

In this volume, Robert Kolb sets out to fill a void in Luther research by exploring the ways that the reformer used biblical stories to drive home his theological perspective. In the early chapters Kolb lays out some of the basic language and observations that have become central in narrative theology: the role of meta-narratives, the narrative gaps that the reader must fill, the role of narrative in the formation of personal and moral identity, the impact of narrative on affective and volitional elements of human existence, and the way that social location affects the appropriation of meaning from a narrative. He then explores the approaches employed by “the raconteur of Wittenberg” (46). At times, Luther uses the biblical narrative simply to illustrate the point he wishes to make, showing David as an example of a faithful political leader or Abraham as an exemplar of faith. The catchy barbs of the stories hook the hearer (57). At other times, Luther “exercised his own literary hand...in telling the story” (47). In other words, he filled in the gaps and expanded the story using his own intuitions. He draws upon the lived experiences of his hearers and weaves those into the story. “The professor sharpens the edges of the story. He drifts in and out of the narrative, using it as the occasion for expanding his treatment of the human condition as people of all times resist and flee God’s Word, its promise, and its commands” (69).

The theological framework for Luther’s use of story is that “God is a God of conversation” (xvi). This God is “the ultimate storyteller” (63). God initiates the story and invites others to step into the new way of understanding the world that the story presents. Divine stories help to establish the trustworthiness of God and therein create trust in those addressed by them. Kolb explores Luther’s use of stories to define what it means to be human (chapter 3), how suffering and affliction shape the life of the believer (chapter 4), how Christians respond to God’s word with prayer and obedience in the sacred realm (chapter 5), how faith leads to service toward the neighbor in our callings (chapter 6), and how death might be faced with trust in God’s mercy (chapter 7).

Certain biblical narratives take central stage in this exploration. Luther’s lectures on Genesis provide fertile ground for reflection in all of the above-mentioned areas. Abraham and Joseph come up frequently as models for understanding the life of faith. Davidic narratives play their role in this book, especially when Kolb reflects on Luther’s understanding of governmental service. The gospel narratives also come into the conversation throughout the book, although not as often as one might suppose. The fact that Luther taught Old Testament clearly has an impact in terms of the subject matter he treated.

Many sections of the book lift up interpretive work by Luther that this reader found intriguing. Luther speculated that God’s confrontation with Cain may have actually come in the voice of Adam, Cain’s father, who was seized by the Holy Spirit and therefore could speak on God’s behalf (50). Luther imagines that the beheading of John the Baptist was a

thinly concealed plot that Herod conceived and carried out intentionally while feigning public remorse (51). Zacchaeus provides a model of “reckless trust” in Christ (76). In each case, Luther tries to “integrate in his hearers the biblical writer’s paradigmatic narrative and the sense of identity as child of God that it created and cultivated. The retelling of biblical stories nurtured the life of repentance that battled temptation, trusted God, and made his presence known in the world through the love of neighbor” (58).

Kolb has indeed begun a conversation that is worthy of continuing, and this is an important contribution to the field of Luther studies. At times I found myself feeling that more could have been mined from Luther’s work if the conceptual categories from narrative studies introduced in the early part of the book had been consistently used throughout the examination of specific narratives. Those useful frameworks with their terminology did not

sufficiently inform the latter part of the book. Often Kolb’s presentation makes it appear that Luther used biblical narratives to do little more than illustrate a doctrinal point that he had formulated apart from the particularities of the text. Yet I suspect something more profound is going on. I do not doubt that Kolb is aware of these dynamics, but wish he had guided the reader into deeper reflection upon them. For example, Luther’s tendency to read Germany into the gaps of the text was one of the ways that he facilitated the *for you* character of his preaching to his particular congregation. Yes, Mary illustrates the role of humility in the presence of God (163), but, even more, Luther’s choice to portray her as a domestic servant whom God chose in her lowly station opened up a space for the large percentage of such servants in Germany to know that God chooses them as well.

One area that will help us in the continuation of this conversation is careful reconstruc-

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tion of the role of the oral proclamation of the narratives in the worship and educational context. Kolb rightly notes that editors and note takers who provide us with Luther's sermons and lectures undoubtedly omitted details that the living congregation would have heard. Just as modern sermon collections reference a biblical text with a citation rather than a recitation of the biblical text, ancient editors may have left out what for Luther deserved the main focus. He always insisted that the word itself trumps any commentary on it. Yet, we do not know exactly how much of the narrative was shared prior to the preaching. Also Luther's lively translations themselves may help us understand what was heard in the announcing of God's word, including affective dimensions. While oral communication is notoriously difficult to recapture centuries after it has occurred, work in biblical studies has shown that clues of the living performances can be traced in textual materials, making possible the construction of likely performance scenarios. Now that Kolb has provided us with a "sketch" (183) of Luther's narrative proclamation, we have a framework for taking seriously Luther's use of narrative in greater detail. This is a great gift.

Philip Ruge-Jones
Texas Lutheran University
Seguin, Texas

HERMENEUTICS: AN INTRODUCTION TO INTERPRETIVE THEORY,

by Stanley E. Porter and Jason C. Robinson.
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011. Pp. 303.
\$30.00 (paper).

Stanley E. Porter and Jason C. Robinson have produced an introduction that bridges the gap between pastor and scholar in the underappreciated foundational realm of interpretive theory. While many works in recent years focus on interpretive methods and modern interpretive perspectives such as histori-

cal-critical, reader response, deconstructive, and others, this work addresses the philosophical and theological developments behind those methods and perspectives. The authors' purpose is not to convince the reader of the proper steps to interpret a text of Scripture (exegesis), but rather to trace the historical steps of the past few centuries of presupposition and development of thinking about how readers understand texts (hermeneutics). "Our goal in this book is to consider some of the most popular ways in which this hermeneutical activity has been conceived and some of the things we may do to improve our chances of getting interpretation right" (3).

Chronologically ordered, beginning in the eighteenth century and proceeding to the present, each chapter focuses on a significant development of thought and its most influential representatives. Six distinct hermeneutical trends are foundational: romantic, phenomenological and existential, philosophical, critical, structural, and deconstruction. Four important adaptations are also identified: hermeneutic phenomenology, dialectical theology and exegesis, theological hermeneutics, and literary hermeneutics. The chronological ordering of the chapters creates an organizational challenge; the first adaptation (chapter 5, hermeneutic phenomenology) lies between the third and fourth trends (chapters 4, philosophical, and 6, critical) with the remaining three adaptations following the final trend. Keeping trends and adaptations distinct is helpful for readers to follow the book's logic. With this organizational clarification, a summary of each chapter will now be productive.

"Hermeneutics and New Foundations" traces Schleiermacher and Dilthey as they represent romanticism's reaction to the effects of the rationality of the Enlightenment. By returning to the human experience of understanding, romanticism sought to restore the human dynamic from the quantifiable and mechanical. Schleiermacher's religious piety

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focused on Scripture as relational and communicative while Dilthey's humanism pushed to develop a general hermeneutic (theory of understanding) through the human and social sciences. Their work together moved the focus from the text to the authors of the text.

"Phenomenology and Existential Hermeneutics" traces Husserl and Heidegger's move from authors to readers and explores how one comes to "know." Phenomenology refers to what is seen or observed and "is meant to be a critical way of examining experience as it is, without distorting it by turning genuine experience into an abstraction" (53). The preeminence of experience both acknowledges the inescapability of presuppositions and seeks to use the reader's situated stance to advance understanding.

"Hans-Georg Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics" draws together the preceding trends into "a general or all-inclusive philosophical description that aids in our encoun-

ters with historical texts as well as in our encounters with the world" (81). Thus Gadamer brings together the horizons of reader and text and then pushes the reader into an ongoing and dynamic dialogical experience with the text, a process that changes both text and reader and produces truth.

"Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutic Phenomenology" adapts the preceding trends by examining language as discourse, leaning into speech-act theory, and by identifying a plurality of meanings at various levels of language.

"Jürgen Habermas' Critical Hermeneutics" seeks critical methodological criteria for analyzing communication. While accepting the situated stance of the reader, Habermas posits that a return to the Enlightenment value of rationality, with the goal of equality and open dialogue with opposing positions, will allow the reader to overcome presuppositions and move closer to consensus on meaning. Habermas

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In "Structuralism," Daniel Patte describes exegesis (the analysis of text) as leading to hermeneutics (meaning for the modern reader) in a way controlled by the structures (linguistic, narrative, or mythological) of a text. "These complex underlying structures—arguably unknown by the author—are what determine the meaning of the text" (182).

"Jacques Derrida and Deconstruction" further disconnects meaning from the author. While structuralism analyzes the rails that controlled the meaning of the text beyond even the knowledge of the author, deconstruction places meaning at the disposal of the imagination of the reader. The term "de-construction" becomes ironic when Derrida views the process as building upon the possibilities of the language of the text.

The remaining three adaptations round off the body of the work. First, "Dialectical Theology and Exegesis" traces the contributions of Barth and Bultmann. Barth's distinction between the Bible as the word of God and the Bible witness to God, and Bultmann's distinction between the ancient worldview and existential truth both seek to resolve the tension between text and understanding. Second, "Theological Hermeneutics" traces the contributions of Thiselton and Vanhoozer. From a biblical and existential perspective, Thiselton advances Gadamer's approach to connect hermeneutical method with doctrinal practice. From systematic theology, Vanhoozer revitalizes the importance of author, text, and reader into what he calls the "drama of doctrine." Third, "Literary Hermeneutics" traces the contributions of Alan Culpepper and Stephen Moore. Culpepper develops a communications model that positions meaning between the text and the reader. Moore posits meaning much closer to the reader, demonstrating the results of deconstructive reading.

A brief concluding chapter returns the reader to the theoretical question, "What Is

Hermeneutics?" The introductory rather than rhetorical nature of this book is reiterated: "While there may be no universal agreement as to which hermeneutical theory to accept, there are many positive and provocative approaches that encourage us to think deeply and critically about our own interpretive theories" (298).

Though this book focuses on the development of hermeneutical theory, the biographical material provided on each of the key representatives was helpful in explaining how these theories developed. Without overstating this, the effect was to move extremely technical theoretical material into more story format to allow readers to see the human connections behind the thoughts. This moved a potentially dry philosophy text into readable and memorable form. Still, the biographical insights do not overpower the technically challenging nature of this work. Porter and Robinson have provided a solid summary for the experienced philosopher/theologian and a stretching read for those less familiar with these theoretical foundations of hermeneutics.

Dean M. Erickson
Crown College
St. Bonifacius, Minnesota

THE CROSS AND THE LYNCHING

TREE, by James H. Cone. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011. Pp. 202. \$28.00 (cloth).

"Every time a white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus. The lynching tree is the cross in America. When American Christians realize that they can meet Jesus only in the crucified bodies in our midst, they will encounter the real scandal of the cross" (158). So concludes James H. Cone in his essential new book.

Really, if you read only one piece of theologically informed nonfiction this year, make it this one. Among other things, Cone draws our attention to the fact that no one, not one single

theologian of note in the last century, has ever drawn a sustained comparison between the innocent suffering of those lynched in the United States, and the cross/lynching of Jesus Christ. Although conservative Christians made lynching an actual part of their religion, liberal Christians of the same period were completely silent on the subject—an omission as damning as the commission.

As an epigraph in the book states, “Perhaps nothing about the history of mob violence in the United States is more surprising than how quickly an understanding of the full horror of lynching has receded from the nation’s collective historical memory” (W. Fitzburgh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*).

James Cone takes as his point of reference for this insight the work of Reinhold Niebuhr who, in a theological career that influenced many African American and social justice theologians, failed himself to highlight any direct comparison between the practice of lynching, and the cross that centered prominently in his theological ethics. It was and remains a glaring oversight. To reflect on the failure of one of our nation’s most “progressive” theologians to consider the analogy between the cross and the lynching tree is “to address a defect in the conscience of white Christians and to suggest why African Americans have needed to trust and cultivate their own theological imagination” (32).

The first chapter of this book recounts the history of the lynching tree in the black experience, and looks at poetry and art from the time period that illustrate the analogy between the cross and lynching. Chapter two, as has already been mentioned, focuses on the failure of Niebuhr to make use of this analogy in his theology. Some of the most poignant passages in the book are when Cone shifts from the voice of theologian and historian into a more personal voice. Cone teaches at Union Theological Seminary, where Niebuhr also taught, and so Cone recognizes the ways he has been shaped by Niebuhr and the tradition he established,

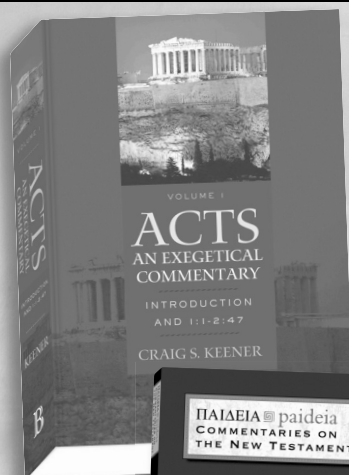
while also being excluded or overlooked by it. As he notes (thus illustrating the winsomeness and power of his liberationist approach to theology), “White theologians do not normally turn to the black experience to learn about theology” (64).

Chapter three is a meditation on Martin Luther King Jr.’s “staring down of the lynching tree.” King, together with all African Americans of the time, lived with the horrible prospect that at any time they might be lynched. Living one’s theology makes a lot of difference to the theology we develop. “It is one thing to teach theology (like Niebuhr, Barth, Tillich and most theologians) in the safe environs of a classroom and quite another to live one’s theology in a situation that entails the risk of one’s life” (70).

Chapters four and five are theological meditations on lynching in the black literary imagination. Perhaps the most concise and powerful statement of this imagination is Gwendolyn Brooks’s line in “The Chicago Defender Sends a Man to Little Rock,” when she writes, “The loveliest lynchee was our Lord” (98). Chapter five also shifts to a specific look at the womanist perspective, especially as this informs our theologies of atonement and understanding of the “meaning” of innocent suffering. His summary of the womanist approach is worth quoting in full:

I accept Delores Williams’s rejection of theories of atonement as found in the Western theological tradition and in the uncritical proclamation of the cross in many black churches. I find nothing redemptive about suffering in itself. The gospel of Jesus is not a rational concept to be explained in a theory of salvation, but a story about God’s presence in Jesus’ solidarity with the oppressed, which led to his death on the cross. What is redemptive is the faith that God snatches victory out of defeat, life out of death, and hope out of despair, as revealed in the biblical and

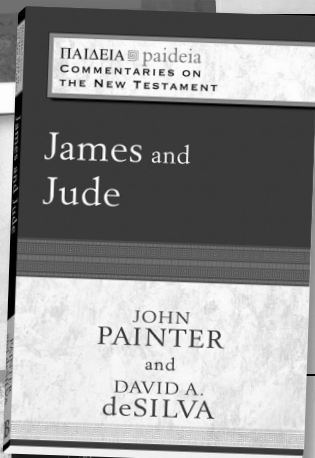
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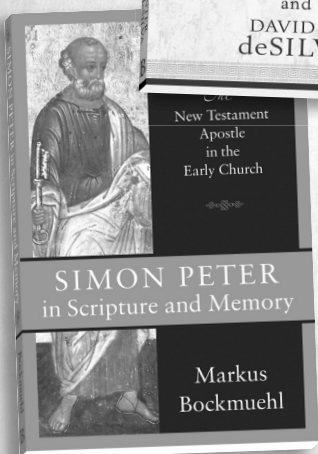
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black proclamation of Jesus' resurrection.
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Cone concludes with one further insight, that "in *Black Theology and Black Power* [his first book] and all the texts that followed, including this one, I begin and end my theological reflections in the social context of black people's struggle for justice. The cross is the burden we must bear in order to attain freedom" (151).

As a church, we keep lamenting that we are a shrinking denomination, and we think this is because we've lost our identity and missional impulse. But what if in fact we are shrinking because we are in captivity to white middle-classness? What if the antidote is clear listening to the black experience in order to overcome our pious and faulty misunderstandings of the cross? These are the kinds of questions James Cone forces this white theologian to ask.

Clint Schnekloth
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Fayetteville, Arkansas

AMERICAN RELIGION: CONTEMPORARY TRENDS, by Mark Chaves. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011. Pp.160. \$22.95 (cloth).

Mark Chaves, professor of sociology, religion, and divinity at Duke University, has offered an extremely helpful and readable text on the state of religion in America in his book *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*. It is a short book, able to be read in one or two sittings, free of most of the pedantic sociological models and tables that balloon most other texts in the sociology of religion. It is also slimmer because Chaves seeks to paint only a broad, aggregate picture of religion in America, not spending too much time and space on subgroups, only addressing them when it is necessary for the broad, national picture he wishes to paint. He explains that the book is for

a larger public, for anyone wanting to know what has and has not changed in American religion.

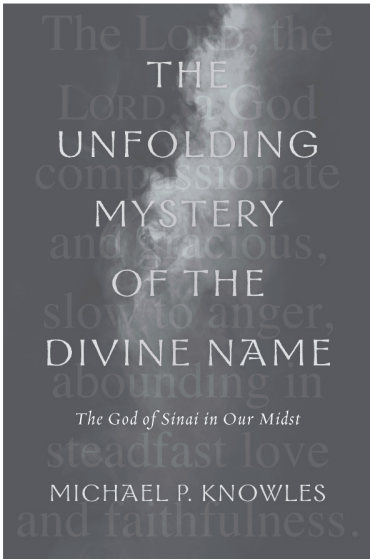
On this front Chaves succeeds wonderfully, giving the reader a very helpful overview of the religious landscape, avoiding many of the pitfalls that denominations and the media herald. Chaves shows that pronouncing the extremes of either religious resurgence or massive decline is simply not backed by the empirical research. Rather, Chaves contends that the American religious landscape has been mostly stable for the last four decades, since 1972. He picks 1972, not randomly, but because it is the first year of a national research set that asked specific questions about religious participation and views. The book's chapters then pick up on multiple themes, comparing and contrasting them through the decades of the 1970s, '80s, '90s, and 2000s. Chaves finds, with few exceptions, solid consistency across these decades. He explains that if there has been any movement in American religious commitment it is toward less religion, but even this is only a moderate loss.

Chapter 1 lays out the direction and method of his study; it then is in chapter 2 that Chaves begins his work. This chapter examines diversity in American religion, exploring the common belief that the United States is becoming a more and more religiously pluralistic place. Chaves finds little support for this, explaining that non-Christian religious groups in the country have remained, for the most part, the same. There has clearly been more media light on Muslims, for instance, but this doesn't represent actual numbers.

Rather, America continues to have a strong Christian representation in its populace. Yet, while actual statistical diversity has not increased since 1972, individuals' views of tolerance are much stronger. Chaves explains that studies reveal a high number of religious switchings and openness to cross-religious marriage that place most of us in familial contact with people of different religious commit-

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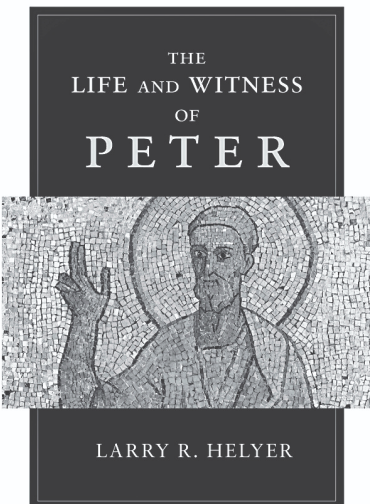
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ments. So while the number of non-Christian citizens has not increased, it appears that the networks and connections among them have diversified (e.g., your aunt marries a Jewish man, then divorces him and converts to Mormonism, and then three years later dates a Catholic guy).

Beliefs are the topic of chapter 3. It appears that most traditional religious perspectives remain at the same levels as in 1972, with some even increasing. For instance, while belief that God exists has dropped three to four percent in four plus decades, (but remains strongly in the 90 percentiles), belief in the afterlife has risen from 75 to 80 percent. The only significant and very interesting drop in traditional belief is in the area of seeing the Bible as inerrant. It has taken by far the deepest plunge, dropping from 40 percent in 1972 to 30 percent now. Chaves explains that some of this loss has to do with the rise in college education, but he contends that far more has to do with commitment to tolerance and discomfort with the rigid particularity of interpreting faith through one religious perspective.

Chapters 4 and 5 surround participation in a weekly worship service, and in turn, the size and pull of congregations. Chaves is not willing to say that weekly participation is down, though he does believe that it has softened. He explains that the report of weekly religious participation remains at around 40 percent, but this number is shaved when studies are done with time diaries, showing participation in religious services to be more like 27 percent. Regardless, Chaves strongly believes that attendance has dropped some, but has been stable since the 1990s. Yet, what has increased is the percentage of people who never attend, as opposed to going once or twice a year. This has jumped from 13 percent in 1972 to 22 percent today. For the pastor the Easter and Christmas Christian seems, for good or ill, to be endangered.

When it comes to the congregations that these people attend, Chaves shockingly finds a

huge trend in all denominations and traditions toward bigger churches. He explains that the same amount of people are going to churches but they are going to fewer churches, showing that big churches are getting bigger. But this growth often only lasts a cycle of five years before a new church becomes the big one, drawing the same people to it.

Leadership and views of clergy is the focus of chapter 6. Chaves's findings are not good, showing that clergy trust has gone down significantly. People report less and less confidence in their clergy, and young students seem less and less willing to choose religious leadership as a profession.

The final two chapters (7 and 8) surround the divide between liberal and conservative. Chaves first states brilliantly that it is simply wrong to assume that people are leaving liberal/mainline churches for conservative ones. This isn't true. Rather, the losses of the mainline and plateauing of evangelicals (their numbers are not growing, Chaves shows) has much more to do with family investment and form. Evangelicals have done a better job keeping their children involved and maintaining two-parent, uninterrupted homes. Chaves shows that this has radical impact on religious involvement, and more of those children remain involved in church into adulthood.

American Religion, for such a thin book, packs a punch, providing helpful insights and myth-busting perspectives on almost every page. This really is a book that every pastor should take the time to read. It will be a quick but powerful dose of the state of American religion.

Andrew Root
Luther Seminary
Saint Paul, Minnesota

PASTOR AND PRESIDENT: REFLECTIONS OF A LUTHERAN CHURCH-MAN, by David W. Preus. Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2011. Pp. 185. \$18.00 (paper).

Memoirs are tricky things to write. At their worst, they can be self-congratulatory, and do more to obscure the truth than to show it. At their best, they can be illuminative windows into a part of history that we cannot glimpse directly. This book is of the latter group, a very useful and fine memoir, giving us a view into the life and work of a twentieth-century American Lutheran leader. It is the biographical reminiscences and reflections of David Preus, a Lutheran pastor and church leader, most notably President of the American Lutheran Church from 1973 to its merger into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1988. It is a modest book, but the book's modesty cannot hide the nature and wisdom of his extraordinary career as a pastor and a church leader. It

is also an interesting and valuable book not simply for the historical record but also for the sum and substance of his valuable reflections on the future of Lutheranism in North America.

The author came from a long line of Lutheran pastors and church leaders within Norwegian-American Lutheranism. After two pastoral calls in South Dakota, he became pastor at University Lutheran Church of Hope in Minneapolis in 1957. In 1968 he was elected vice-president of the American Lutheran Church, and with the death of Kent Knutson in 1973, became president, and served in this capacity until 1988. After some reflections on his community service in Minneapolis in the turbulent 1960s, the main body of the book concentrates on his national and international service as a leader of the ALC. The book concentrates on several areas in which he was especially active during his career: his social justice activities in Minneapolis in the 1960s, his leadership within American Lutheranism

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during the 1970s and 1980s, his ecumenical work within world Christianity, and his role in the merger negotiations that led to the formation of the ELCA in 1988.

The book shows the wisdom of his leadership in many of these areas. He helped organize his local community in the face of social and racial change, and provided effective leadership on the Minneapolis School Board. During the 1970s he solidified the ministry of the ALC through leadership of national church structures, while maintaining a focus on the local congregation. As an American Lutheran leader, he maintained good relations with other Lutherans in the United States and around the world, and provided sound leadership in moving toward the ELCA.

There are many important insights in this book. He took a fairly unpopular stand in the early 1980s when he proposed a far more modest federation of American Lutheran groups, rather than the organic union that led to the ELCA; the enormous energy involved in this merger, and subsequent traumas of the ELCA, suggest that his proposal deserved far more serious attention than it received. Once the process to form the ELCA came into being, Preus suggested a decentralized form of organization that would maintain the power of the new church much closer to the congregations. This plan, too, was ignored, but the subsequent history of the ELCA suggests that he was correct in this; leaders currently thinking about restructuring the ELCA would be well advised to consult his original proposals. In many of these areas history has shown the thoughtfulness of

his ideas, even if they were not appreciated at the time.

Particularly important are his thoughts concerning the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod during its times of internal trouble in the 1970s and 1980s. David Preus had a special connection to this church through his cousin, LCMS President J. A. O. (Jack) Preus. Even though he often did not agree with his cousin, David Preus still maintained a close relationship with him and with the leaders of the LCMS, and his narrative concerning this period is a valuable historical record of a turbulent time. Beyond its historical value, his work with the leaders of the LCMS provides a valuable model of inter-Lutheran cooperation, despite differences in theology and practice.

This is an important and illuminating book, which leads the reader to want more. His early life and career as a parish pastor is passed over in only a few, brief pages, and the reader is left wishing for much more of a narrative of his life. Other than pointing out his alternative proposals for Lutheran unity and structure in the 1980s, he is silent on the subsequent course of the ELCA. But it would be extremely valuable to hear his wisdom and experience as to how the history of the ELCA has unfolded, and the ways in which American Lutheranism might move forward from its present crises. Historians and general readers alike will benefit from this book and its important insights into contemporary American Lutheranism.

Mark Granquist
Luther Seminary
Saint Paul, Minnesota