

Reviews



LUTHER'S WITTENBERG WORLD: THE REFORMER'S FAMILY, FRIENDS, FOLLOWERS, AND FOES, by Robert Kolb. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018. Pp. 312. \$34 (hardcover).

Robert Kolb is a notable Luther scholar who—along with a number of his collaborators at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis—has endeavored to widen the frame of Luther research by investigating the manner in which Luther's context and associates shaped a broader “way” of doing theology under the call of the gospel. Consequently, *Luther's Wittenberg World* seeks to fill in the details on some of the personalities who surrounded the Reformer, both friends and enemies. Kolb's entry is a welcome addition, not only because of the way it highlights other people adjacent to Luther himself, but also because of how it adds needed context to the wider story of reform. The text of the book itself consists of an introduction and eight chapters. Noticeable preference is given to the chronological progress of Luther's life and the Reformation that he helped instigate, but the more important organizing principle is the relation of each figure to Luther (by geography, for example). At the beginning of the book is a set of helpful maps that show the political contours of the Reformation and its world, as well as a nice description of “The Reformation Window” which

graces the book's cover. At the end, Kolb supplies a short glossary of terms, a bibliography, and an index of individuals featured in the book.

Kolb's brief introduction sets forth John Donne's famous saying that “No man is an island” (1). For Kolb, Luther is no exception. The broader historical events of Luther's lifetime, as well as the ideas that shaped his own, are not the only scholarly concerns that should inform an accurate and substantial rendering of the Reformer. Indeed, Luther's theological commitment to language underwrites such a historical procedure, since “Luther sought to create and cultivate a culture based upon the conversation of congregations and villages, families and individuals, with God” (2). Chapter 1, “Child, Pupil, Student, Monk,” profiles some of the most important figures in Luther's early life, such as his parents, siblings, childhood friends, and some of his early educational associations. Chapter 2 picks up where Luther makes his transition to the newly founded University of Wittenberg in 1508. Here, Kolb describes some of Luther's initial intellectual sources, like Gabriel Biel, with his nominalist *via moderna*, and Johannes Reuchlin, the notable Hebraist of the time. Some of Luther's early colleagues, political contacts, and some common citizens, as well as Luther's printers, are noted here.

In chapter 3, Kolb takes up “The Wittenberg Team,” which introduces Luther’s family, closest collaborators, and his early students. Descriptions of Luther’s wife, Katharina von Bora; his most notable partner in reform, Philip Melancthon; and other close associates—like Nikolaus von Amsdorf, Georg Spalatin, Justus Jonas, and Johannes Bugenhagen—are found here. Kolb also includes some sketches of related figures in other disciplines. Artists, such as Lukas Cranach the Elder and Lukas Cranach the Younger, and area pastors like Conrad Cordatus, are included here too. Kolb widens his frame beyond Wittenberg in chapter 4, issuing biographical profiles for “German Reformers”—that is, Luther’s allies in the other German-speaking lands. This very substantial chapter describes the lives and contributions of many different people, including intellectuals, artists,

and knights. Luther’s notable allies in Strassburg—Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito—are honored here, for example.


In chapter 5, Kolb profiles the emerging first generation of Wittenberg students who remained largely in Germany. Here, the reader will find helpful biographical remarks about important early Lutherans such as Cyriacus Spangenberg, Martin Chemnitz (the “Second Martin”), Andreas Musculus, David Chytraeus, and Jakob Andreae, to name only a few. In chapter 6, Kolb documents the influence of Wittenberg students who disseminated the Reformation outside of Germany, especially in Scandinavia. Olaus and Laurentius Petri, Michael Agricola, William Tyndale, and Robert Barnes are all noted here. Kolb’s biographical interest is not only in Luther’s immediate theological or ecclesial associates but also in the political leadership that so importantly shaped the story of

New from Walter
Brueggemann.
Available now!


WORKING PREACHER BOOKS

**PREACHING
FROM THE
OLD
TESTAMENT**

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN



\$18.99



Good preaching
changes lives
workingpreacher.org


Coming in Spring 2020

WORKING PREACHER BOOKS

**PREACHING
THE
HEADLINES**

Pulpit Pitfalls and
Possibilities When Attending
to Life on the Ground

LISA L. THOMPSON




WORKING PREACHER BOOKS

**LEADING
WITH THE
SERMON**

Preaching as Leadership

WILLIAM H. WILLIMON





WORKING PREACHER BOOKS

**THE GOSPEL
PEOPLE DON'T
WANT TO HEAR**

How to Preach Challenging
Messages so They Are Heard

LISA CRESSMAN



 **fortress press**

the Reformation. In chapter 7, “Princes Friendly and Hostile,” Kolb notes political figures from around Europe who were involved with the Reformation, either positively or negatively. In this chapter, readers will find information on notable characters like Frederick the Wise, Johann the Steadfast, Philip of Hesse, and Henry VIII. Finally, Kolb brings the book to a close with a chapter on “Luther’s Foes,” where he helpfully describes various individuals of different perspectives, including Pope Leo X, Johann Tetzel, Johann Eck, Ulrich Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger, Johann Oecolampadius, John Calvin, and Thomas Müntzer.

A great strength of Kolb’s presentation is his skillful handling of the nuanced theological continuum of views separating Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and the emerging Reformed tradition. The disagreements between Gnesio-Lutherans (the “original” Lutherans) and the Philippists (the more compromising disciples of Melancthon) are all presented quite carefully. Another valuable contribution of *Luther’s Wittenberg World* is how it widens the parameters of the research to include associates of the Reformation outside of Wittenberg specifically, and even Germany more generally. Indeed, in some ways it delivers more than it promises, going far beyond the immediate confines of Luther’s Wittenberg context. One possible formatting critique is that the book could have been organized as an encyclopedia, with each biographical description serving as an entry, organized more or less alphabetically. On the other hand, organizing the book more narratively and topically, as Kolb does, enables him to trace the history of the Reformation and how that story is interwoven with the personal stories of the characters involved. Either

way, *Luther’s Wittenberg World* embodies a fine biographical contribution to Reformation scholarship.

John W. Hoyum
Denny Park Lutheran Church
Seattle, Washington

THE ESSENTIAL KARL BARTH: A READER AND COMMENTARY, by Keith L. Johnson. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019. Pp. 371. \$40 (hardcover).

In his gem of a book *The Essential Karl Barth*, Keith L. Johnson, professor of theology at Wheaton College, puts together several key primary texts from Karl Barth’s theological opus. These are not just texts from Barth’s well-known *Church Dogmatics* but key texts from throughout his theological career. Johnson begins in part 1 with writings from the 1920s, which include an excerpt from the second edition (1922) of Barth’s (in)famous *Romans Commentary*; an excerpt from his correspondence with Adolf von Harnack; an excerpt from his *Göttingen Dogmatics*, which was his first lecture cycle in dogmatic theology; and some shorter writings. In part 2, Johnson focuses on writings from the *Church Dogmatics*. And in part 3, Johnson gives the reader a tasty morsel of some of Barth’s political-theological writings, such as a sermon on Romans 15, his lecture on “The Community of Christians and the Community of Citizens,” the Barmen Declaration, a letter to Christians in wartime, and some of Barth’s self-reflections. Overall, the selection of Barth’s work that is included in this volume is wonderfully representative of Barth’s basic theological commitments

May 18–22, 2020
Atlanta

Festival of HOMILETICS

Preaching a New Earth: Climate and Creation

Featuring speakers:

Anna Carter Florence
Olu Brown
Teresa Fry Brown*
Carmen Deedy
Neichelle Guidry*
Katherine Hayhoe*
Katie Hays*

Raquel S. Lettsome
Karoline Lewis
Otis Moss III
Raphael Warnock
Will Willimon
Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove*
Rob Wright

**New voice for 2020*

Registration opens November 1.

festivalofhomiletics.com

as well as the arc of his development into the most influential theologian of the twentieth century.

Johnson gives a succinct but detailed biographical sketch of Barth's life at the beginning of the book. It shows Karl Barth as a man who was deeply concerned about proclaiming the word of God, about teaching the church about the work of the Spirit, but most importantly, about how Christian theology must first and foremost and only ever be about Jesus Christ. Johnson shows nicely how throughout Barth's work and life, Jesus Christ—not just the technical details of Christology—was Barth's number one priority. Johnson does not shy away from some of the more uncomfortable details of Barth's personal life with his secretary and lover, Charlotte von Kirschbaum, and the struggles he had working through his commitment to his wife Nelly (spoiler alert: Barth and Nelly never divorced, and Kirschbaum lived with them). Johnson reminds us that the most formative years of Barth's life were during his time as a pastor in Safenwil and that his theology consistently focused on helping the preacher preach the word of God in Jesus Christ.

Johnson includes particularly helpful excerpts on Barth's doctrine of election, anthropology, and Christology. Barth's doctrine of election from the *Church Dogmatics* II/2 is key to understanding his concept of God's being, and yet Barth gives very long and detailed historical analyses throughout his own remarks, making his volume difficult to read. Johnson cuts through the long analyses to give the reader some of Barth's most important insights on election. The same is true for the excerpts Johnson includes on Barth's Christology from the *Church Dogmatics* IV/1,2 and 3. Because Barth's discussion on Christology is so long

(three volumes, unfinished), it is hard for students or an educated, general audience to get a holistic view of Barth's views on incarnation, atonement, or our salvation. Here too, Johnson gives a valuable overview of Barth's Christology in Barth's own words. This section in particular will be a good tool to use in a classroom.

Johnson chooses carefully from Barth's doctrine of creation, which has had a more ambivalent reception history because of Barth's exegesis of Scripture and his patriarchal imagination about men and women. Johnson helpfully chooses an excerpt where Barth is very clear about humanity as God's covenant partner from *Church Dogmatics* III/2; his choice echoes the emphases on this positive view of the human being and human relationships by senior German scholars of Karl Barth, such as Eberhard Busch and Wolf Krötke in their respective works. Johnson's choice here is also a great illustration of how Barth utilizes both a dialectical *and* an analogical method in his *Church Dogmatics*. Many of the excerpts in Johnson's book illustrate this flexibility and methodological nimbleness in Barth's thought.

If there were one open question I would have for Johnson's collection of excerpts, it would be this: Barth repeated again and again how new generations of thinkers and theologians must find ways to speak about God's gracious election and presence in their particular contexts. To thinkers like Wolf Krötke and other European Barth scholars, this sometimes means that theologians today must not only think *with* Barth but think *through* him and *beyond* him. It is unclear how some of the excerpts of Johnson's volume will help theologians think about the reality of Jesus Christ and his resurrection in today's world of interfaith dialogue, global Christianity,

unfettered capitalism, late modernity, and a secular age. It remains to be seen whether these excerpts of Barth's theology will help us think with, through and beyond Barth, or if some of Barth's writings that naturally had to remain outside of this volume would be better guides for a twenty-first-century Christianity.

One thing is clear: Johnson tells the reader in his introduction that he wants to capture the drama and the essence of Barth's theology. He wants readers to get to know Barth while recognizing the complexity of Barth's thought. In this he succeeds. Students and readers alike will find this a very useful resource for education and edification.

Amy Marga
Luther Seminary
Saint Paul, Minnesota

A COMPANION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT: THE GOSPELS AND ACTS, by Matthew L. Skinner. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017. Pp. 274. \$39.95 (paper).

Matthew L. Skinner is professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, as well as a regular contributor to resources for biblical interpretation and preaching. While his scholarly attention has traditionally focused on Luke and Acts, this three-volume set shows his interpretive skills across the entire New Testament canon. Along with its companion volumes, this first book aims to "accompany readers—especially seminarians, graduate students, and advanced undergraduates—who want to pay special attention to the theological character of the New Testament" (3). As



**The best
preaching,
portable.**

**Working Preacher provides
inspiration, interpretation, and
imagination wherever you are,
whenever you need it.**

Get a lifetime of preaching content for \$4.99:

- downloadable podcasts
- videos
- Craft of Preaching series
- English and Spanish commentaries

Download the Working Preacher app.

workingpreacher.org/app

a study guide for theological interpretation, the volume is informed, readable, and exegetically judicious. For seminary and college classrooms especially, the book will be an excellent resource for interpretive study for years to come.

The subtitle makes clear that this volume covers the Gospels and Acts. Perhaps less expected is that nearly half its substance is devoted to introducing the New Testament in general and the Gospels specifically, making it as much historical orientation as it is a survey of specific writings. Readers diving deep into the New Testament, however, will find this extremely enriching. In the introduction (a much more extensive one than in subsequent volumes), Skinner explains his approach and interpretive influences, acknowledging his particular perspective and encouraging readers to take stock of their own (5–6). Here he names some foci of these three volumes: the Old Testament, the Roman Empire, women in the early church, apocalyptic theology, and ongoing theological relevance. The next four chapters introduce the nature of the NT canon (chapter 1); key political, religious, and social realities of the NT world (chapter 2); the nature of the Gospels (Chapter 3); and the historical person Jesus of Nazareth (Chapter 4). Throughout these chapters, Skinner addresses topics of extensive scholarly dialogue with brevity and ease, using readable—sometimes even colloquial—prose to give readers a sense of the *status questionis* on complex issues while sparing them the minutiae. Though works by NT scholars are rarely named, the nuance of discussion reflects authentic familiarity with them. Readers eager to get to NT interpretive chapters sooner can skip ahead (chapters 1–2 especially are general introduction), but these

opening chapters are profoundly informative about the NT world.

The next five chapters (5–9) are dedicated to the Gospels and Acts. After a few paragraphs of introduction, each chapter addresses three topics in relation to the writing at hand: Origins and Ancient Audience, Content Overview, and Themes and Theological Emphases. As a study companion (vs. lengthy commentary), the volume focuses more on overarching themes than interpreting individual passages. With informed humility, Skinner encourages readers to embrace more uncertainty than specific claims about the author, date, and rhetorical purposes of each writing (e.g., 114–15, 141–42, 173–74, 204–5). Though each retains a separate chapter, Skinner finds it helpful to read Luke and Acts as a narrative unity, treating each with an eye to the other (e.g., 190, 192, 194, 235–37). He regularly pays attention to how original audiences would have heard NT texts (e.g., eschatological judgment texts, 133; “church” language, 134–36). At the same time, he appreciates how readers today may find these texts boring (109), uncomfortable (114), and problematic (128–29). He is arguably quick to admit literary flaws (e.g., Mark’s “grossly inelegant Greek” and “lumbering syntax,” 139, 140), but Skinner’s comments show an admirable awareness of the barriers that keep people today from reading Scripture with appreciation.

Consistent across the three volumes, there are neither footnotes nor extensive discussion of scholarly debates. Every volume ends with the same categorized list of “Recommended Resources” for NT study. All three volumes assume no specific confessional stance on the part of readers, but they do expect interest in a historically informed reading of Scripture that influences theological

beliefs (3). Those using the other two volumes of the series will not only find the approach consistent in this first volume but also deem it an invaluable introduction to all three.

What I find most helpful about Skinner's work is his focus on theological interpretation, which allows his interpretive chapters to narrow in on what each writing says about God (e.g., 159–61, 228–29, 231–32). This alone makes these volumes preferable to many other NT introductions, at least for Christian readers. Further, Skinner's work displays an interpretive nuance that is as insightful as it is carefully refined. He neither oversimplifies exegetical issues nor shies away from naming things that are potentially theologically problematic (e.g., apocalyptic judgmentalism, 132–34; insider/outsider language, 163–65; the silence of women, 253–55). The five foci named in the introduction (9–17) do not have the clearest correspondence in the interpretive chapters—in this volume as well as the other two—although all themes and theological emphases discussed are relevant and worthwhile. The pedagogical payoff of these volumes would be enhanced by some visual aids (e.g., charts, images) and/or online resources.

The greatest strengths of the book are its judicious interpretations and attentiveness to theological implications. It also offers a profoundly concise orientation to the NT world that is as substantive as it is well-written. Reading the volume is like sitting in on a class with a seasoned biblical interpreter and seminary professor, making it a rich resource especially for theological students of all kinds.

Troy M. Troftgruben
Wartburg Theological Seminary
Dubuque, Iowa

LEARNING ON LIFE'S WAY: REMEMBERING AND REFLECTING BY A TELLER OF TALL TALES, by Paul R. Sponheim. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018. Pp. 121. \$17 (paper).

For many years, Paul Sponheim has been working toward a synthesis of Søren Kierkegaard's conception of human becoming and A. N. Whitehead's process metaphysics while affirming a Trinitarian conception of God as the creator and future of the world. Throughout his writings, he has been concerned to show that his philosophical theology is rooted in and relevant to everyday life in the church and the world. Sponheim's current work is a memoir in which he reflects on the circumstances, events, and relationships that have evoked and shaped his religious quest and the major themes of his constructive theology.

After a brief preface, the memoir unfolds in five chronologically ordered chapters. In chapter 1, Sponheim writes of growing up in a family that was religiously divided and conspicuously silent on the subject. He observes that he has been making up for this silence for most of his life, and he stresses the need for dialogue about religious differences. His relationship to religious faith was shaped in the tense space between his parents' vastly different religious views. He inherited a skeptical spirit from his agnostic father and was drawn to the Christian faith by his pious mother's unconditional love. He also learned from his religiously divided siblings that God's grace extends to and flows through people of faith as well as those of no faith, and this early life lesson anticipates Sponheim's emphasis on God's gracious activity in the whole of creation. Painful experiences, such as the untimely death of a brother, also marked Sponheim's faith and prompted

urgent questions about God's relation to suffering and evil, which figure prominently in his theology.

In chapter 2, Sponheim recounts a twelve-year period that shaped the course of his life for the next sixty years. At Concordia College, he met Nellie Hanson, the woman he would later marry and of whom he writes, through "all these decades any time I've needed a fresh reminder of a person who believes and lives the Christian faith, she's been there" (24). At Concordia, Sponheim also met Reidar Thomte, a philosophy professor who befriended and mentored him. Thomte was instrumental in Sponheim receiving a Fulbright grant to spend a year in Copenhagen between his first and second years at Luther Seminary studying the work of Søren Kierkegaard. Sponheim writes that it is difficult to overstate the disruptive and formative impact of that year. Of Kierkegaard's impact he writes, "each time I turn to this poet of paradox and master of the dialectic, I go through a two-stage reaction: (1) 'this guy is crazy; this can't be right'; and (2) 'He's hit the nail on the head; this is how things are with God and the creature'" (18). After seminary, Sponheim and his family moved to the University of Chicago for graduate study, and it was during his tenure as a doctoral student that he experienced an "intellectual conversion" through encounter with A. N. Whitehead. He was particularly drawn to Whitehead's cosmology and writes that he has been puzzling ever since then over how (and to what degree) such philosophical categories as flux, becoming, relationship, transition, and creativity can be employed in "speaking of the very real God of whom I learned at my mother's knee" (28). By the end of this decisive period, it had become clear to Sponheim that Kierkegaard and

Whitehead would be the most important resources for his efforts to construct a philosophical theology.

In chapter 3, Sponheim describes the theology he developed over the forty years in which Nell and he raised three boys and were active in ministries in the church and wider community, and he taught at Concordia College and Luther Seminary. As he settled into life in these church-related institutions, his teaching style shifted from the critical religious studies approach he had learned at Chicago to that of a theological conversation. Through these years, he developed and maintained an expansive focus on the world of God's concern and resisted becoming narrowly tuned to God's relationship with the church. He regularly taught the first and second articles of the creed (creation and redemption), electives on Kierkegaard and Whitehead, and a team-taught elective with Terence Fretheim on God, suffering, and evil. The books he published in these years include studies of Kierkegaard's anthropology and Whitehead's cosmology. These were followed by a book exploring Christian faith in God and challenges to Christian faith, a work outlining a conversational approach to religious pluralism, and a theology of creation rooted in the Bible's affirmation that God *is* love. Sponheim's theology came to feature a relational understanding of God as creatively and salvifically present in qualitative otherness to the world's past, present, and future sufferings and joys, beckoning people of every faith and no faith to become truly human.

Chapter 4 concerns Sponheim's life in retirement. He ponders finitude and failing health as well as the deaths of colleagues, siblings, and sons. He also writes of opportunities and of hope for the future. He continued teaching as an



PRESENTS

A master class in all things preaching with
Joy Moore,
Matt Skinner and
Karoline Lewis

The Craft of Preaching

SAVE THE DATE
October 7–9, 2019



LUTHER SEMINARY®
luthersem.edu/preaching

6132_0619

adjunct for nine years after retiring, and during this period he designed a course on creation and the triune God. He has also written three books in retirement. The first of these grounds speaking of God's creative-salvific activity and a dynamic-relational vision of creation and the church in a "process-relational" conception of God. The second brings Kierkegaard and Whitehead together for the purpose of exploring how God's love works in the world, to what extent and how it is powerful, how it creates, and how it avails. The third work examines the structure and content of Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death*, explores its reception through the years, and presses Anti-Climacus's criterion of honesty before God into the task of "seeking together the truth about and of religion

in fully transparent interreligious conversation" (94). In closing this chapter on the present, Sponheim signals the theme of the final chapter by turning to what lies ahead.

In chapter 5, Sponheim explores the theme of Christian hope by pondering two questions, "What would do if it were true?" and "Is it true?" (104). Respecting what would do, he writes "most importantly, God would still be God" (106). With this as his beginning point, he considers continuities and discontinuities between the present order and the final future that would justify speaking of the future as good news. For human creatures, he writes that a transformed future would involve "fully engaged human striving and choosing that is somehow beyond

freedom and its vulnerabilities” (108). Regarding the truth of such a vision, he argues that a nonreductive appeal to experience provides warrant for hope, and reimagines the cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments for God in dialogue with Whitehead and Kierkegaard as expressions of experience rather than as rational proofs. At the end of his argument, Sponheim acknowledges that no argument can establish the truth of the Christian faith; perhaps, the most that can be said is that it “may be true.” “In any case,” he writes, “there’s work to be done with One in whose name it is said that what is required of us is ‘to do justice, and love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God’” (116). He then ends the work as he has spent his life, by inviting us to join the conversation in the hope that it will take on a life of its own.

Sponheim’s memoir illuminates key themes of his theology by viewing them in the context of his story. His emphasis on conversation and his insistence that God is active throughout the world acquires new and greater significance

in the light of his early experience of silence in response to religious differences. Moreover, the dynamic and social character of personal narrative illustrates the relevance of his efforts to blend existentialist and process-metaphysical strands of philosophical theology. His constructive theological proposal raises questions regarding the compatibility of Whitehead’s cosmology and a Trinitarian conception of God, a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, and/or a vision of the final future as metaphysically distinct, in any sense, from the present order of reality. Those interested in engaging these and other elements of his constructive theology will find in this work a succinct summary of his project. More importantly, the work reveals a person who for nearly ninety years has been willing to grapple honestly and humbly with important questions about human life in the world.

James R. Wilson
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia