

# Reviews



**PROMISING FAITH FOR A RUPTURED AGE: AN ENGLISH-SPEAKING APPRECIATION OF OSWALD BAYER**, edited by John T. Pless, Roland Ziegler, and Joshua C. Miller, Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019. xviii + 286, \$35.00 (paperback).

Oswald Bayer's contributions to systematic theology, Luther studies, and scholarship on Johann Georg Hamann were well known for some time on the European continent before they made their way into the English-speaking world. By the 1990s, Bayer's writings began to appear in English translation, especially due to the enterprising initiative of Oliver K. Olson at *Lutheran Quarterly*. In the two and a half decades since, Bayer's work has grown in popularity in American Lutheranism and elsewhere, manifest especially in several monograph-length translation projects. Three scholars of the Missouri Synod—John T. Pless, Roland Ziegler, and Joshua C. Miller—have brought this growing appreciation for Bayer to splendid fruition in the present volume of collected essays. *Promising Faith for a Ruptured Age* contains sixteen chapters that are preceded by a kind foreword by Oliver Olson, an introduction by Joshua Miller, a list of abbreviations, and a catalog of contributors. Miller's introduction sketches in the details of Bayer's life as well as the main lines of his scholarly

contribution—not only to Luther studies but also to the reception of Hamann.

For the purposes of brevity, I pick out three chapters that offer readers a sample of what this volume has in store. The first of these is the book's impressive fifth chapter by Jason D. Lane, "Sanctification as Divine Order or Divine Gift?" (66–93). Bayer himself is notable for rejecting the kind of *ordo salutis* that coalesces in later Lutheran orthodoxy, with its tendency to divorce justification from sanctification in a process comprised of discrete steps designed to protect the cultivation of personal holiness. This development risks losing the radical nature of the gospel as "categorical gift" (67) for the sake of moral improvement. The complexity of early Lutheranism's conception of the new obedience is examined by Lane in connection with two figures of the latter half of the sixteenth century: Simon Musaeus and Simon Pauli. Their respective exegetical engagements with the Epistle of James are used to compare and contrast their differing views of the Christian life as gift or order. Lane concludes that the views of both Musaeus and Pauli are present in the *Formula of Concord*. However, it is Musaeus's account of sanctification as gift—certainly proximate to Bayer's own view—that is most clearly stated as the orthodox position in the *Formula* (69).

Mark C. Mattes's offering, "The Holy Spirit in Luther's Catechisms" (114–35),

is a second chapter that might intrigue potential readers of this book. Luther's catechisms have, until recently, suffered neglect as sources for understanding Luther's theology, especially its pastoral implications. Mattes skillfully draws out the contribution of Luther's catechetical material on the Holy Spirit, identifying Luther's as a Western-shaped pneumatology "with a twist" (115–16). Surprisingly, Mattes observes that divergent voices in Luther interpretation (such as those of the Finnish school) seem to converge with figures like Bayer in affirming that justification and sanctification are not to be separated but tied together in the Spirit's office of applying the saving work of Christ (118). Even so, Mattes proposes a "non-legalistic" account of sanctification that places the agency and power of the Holy Spirit at the center

(120–21). Holiness, therefore, does not reside in works themselves, but in the word of categorical forgiveness that the Spirit imparts (126). Mattes's essay is a particularly commendable feature of this volume that is worthy of attention.

With characteristic energy and ingenuity, Steven D. Paulson endeavors to both appreciate and move beyond speech-act theory in Lutheran theology. "On Swearing and Certainty" (161–80) takes up the nature of truth claims and how the promise of the gospel is actually more certain than any other kind of utterance. A typically scholastic manner of construing the relation between faith and certainty is Anselmic: *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding). Contrary to this, Paulson elucidates Luther's view of the gospel as a promise to which faith clings. God swears by



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God's own word, and therefore binds Godself to the impartation of favor God delivers to the sinner apart from the law. For Paulson, faith itself is "certain certainty," for no "misery is greater than doubt." Likewise, "no joy is greater than God making his certain promise to you and sealing it with his own certainty" (179). Paulson's chapter is especially pastoral, but also includes some nimble engagement with the analytic traditions of contemporary philosophy.

There are, undoubtedly, other worthy essays that should not be overlooked in this volume. Joshua Miller's chapter on solidarity and lament (136–54) breaks new ground in expanding and refining Bayer's own theology of lament. Other essays, like James Nestingen's "The Eschatology of Forgiveness" (155–60) and Pless's chapter on the sacraments in the catechism (181–94), are highlights of the volume as well. Finally, Thomas Trapp's recollections of translating Bayer's work (227–36) are fascinating. They are also sage remarks for those interested in the task of translation. As a whole, the essays collected in *Promising Faith for a Ruptured Age* strike a remarkable tone by upholding confessional integrity without sacrificing constructive and critical engagement with alternative theological perspectives and discourses. In this, the various essayists do an excellent job of honoring Bayer's own work, marked as it is by such confessional fidelity paired with critical openness. This book is highly recommended for students, pastors, and scholars wishing to engage more deeply with one of the most important Lutheran theologians of the past several decades.

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**HOW CHANGE COMES TO YOUR CHURCH: A GUIDEBOOK FOR CHURCH INNOVATIONS**, by Patrick Keifert and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019. 160 pages. \$16.99.

Pat Keifert and Wes Granberg-Michaelson are two of my favorite people. They're wise. They're experienced leaders. They're deeply alive both intellectually and spiritually. And they're fly fishers too. What an unbeatable combination!

Because we've fished together in some of the holiest waters of the fly-fishing religion, it's hard for me to think about their new book without that connection in mind. So please allow me to offer this short metaphor between fly fishing and church leadership in inviting you to read and enjoy *How Change Comes to Your Church*.

Fly fishers, to enjoy their avocation, combine three qualities (among others): knowledge, technique, and spirit. Knowledge for fishers includes knowledge of fish, of streams, of insects, and of other critters that fish like to eat. But that's not all. Anglers also have to know weather, seasons, wind, and other nearly intangible factors that can make the difference between success and failure.

Technique includes everything from tying flies to casting line to navigating across slippery boulders in a fast-flowing stream.

And spirit—that's the hardest to describe, but it's in many ways the "secret sauce" of fly fishing. Spirit has to do with the state of mind one enters as one brings knowledge and technique to a specific situation. It involves a kind of balance and mindfulness, intensity without anxiety, focus without hurry,

determination without excessive aggressiveness, persistence without rigidity. In some sense, the best fly fishers, when they enter the stream, also enter the flow—they join the fish in the fish’s world and seek to make respectful, even reverent, contact through a rod, a line, a piece of almost invisible tippet, and a tiny hook.

Quite a few books approach church leadership in terms of knowledge and technique, and that’s not a bad thing. It’s just not the whole thing. What makes *How Change Comes to Your Church* special is the way that it honors the spirit of leadership.

For example, anyone who has worked with Pat or Wes has been introduced to “dwelling in the Word,” a kind of communal *lectio divina* that invites people to enter the flow of a biblical story. When they emerge from that textual baptism, they see things differently—including

their church, its challenges, its opportunities, its context, and its calling.

I have spent literally hours with the authors wading into the text of Luke 10, where Jesus sends out seventy-two disciples two by two, seeking people of peace, proclaiming the good news of the new civilization of God, moving on when people are unreceptive. I’ve emerged from each of those textual baptisms with new insight into the ongoing movement Jesus started, seeing what we call the church less within the constraints of its current shapes and forms, and more in the larger vision of a grass-roots movement for peace and healing, spreading from home to home and community to community.

*How Change Comes to Your Church* gives you guidance in “dwelling in the Word,” and that gift alone would be worth the time and money you invest in the book.

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As an author myself, I'm aware of how any reader entrusts an author with a huge investment. Allowing a stranger "into one's head," giving them three or five or more hours of one's life to influence one's thinking and values—that's a major act of trust. I encourage you to trust Pat Keifert and Wes Granberg-Michaelson to "mess with your mind," because when you do, you'll return to your church with enriched knowledge, technique, and, most important, spirit.

Brian McLaren

Author, speaker, activist, public theologian, and a leader in the Convergence Network

**THE STORY OF CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS: TRACING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH**, by Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019. xi + 396 pages. \$34.99 (paperback).

This book is a comprehensive history tracing the development of Christian faith statements (creeds and confessions) from the beginning of the Christian movement down to contemporary times. Produced by two Reformed Protestant scholars, Douglas Fairbairn (Patristics) and Ryan Reeves (Early Modern Christianity) from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, this book is a very helpful narrative introduction to the subject. The volume is nicely designed and the text is generally very readable, making it a good introduction to the subject for a fairly wide audience.

One of the stronger portions of the book is the introduction, where the

authors provide a cogent argument for the place of creeds and confessions within the life of Christian churches. The book begins with the earliest Christian impulse to proclaim (or confess) the name of Christ as the essential core of the Christian faith. Working from this, the development of creedal statements was a natural process, as the early Christians sought to regularize these initial statements into common and repeatable formulas that could be shared among believers. The early creeds then came to be common statements of faith that defined not only who was a part of the group but also how the group differentiated itself from other communities. The classic creeds of the early church, forged in controversy and contention, eventually came to be generally recognized as the essential definition of Christian orthodoxy, whether formally or not. The authors deal initially with the question of non-creedalism ("no creed but the Bible") in contemporary American Protestantism, but could do more in this section, as contextually it might be important with the American readers of the book.

Part 1 of the volume deals with the initial controversies that led up to the formation and codification of the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian) in the early church. This can be a rather complicated and technical narrative, especially in the Trinitarian and Christological controversies, but the volume does well in trying to clarify the various technical issues. The development of the creeds is nicely laid out, even at times with the various editions of the creeds side by side. Parts 2 and 3 of the book examine the reception of the creeds in both the Eastern and Western churches from 500 to 1500 CE, and also

delve into the theological developments local to these two churches as they grew apart from each other. The events in the Eastern church are dealt with in a single chapter, whereas the growth of Western theologies is traced more extensively, as a means to set up the eventual theological divisions of the Reformation period.

Part 4 deals with the theological development of Protestant traditions from 1517 to 1648, the further development of Roman Catholic theology, and confessional conflict among the various groups. The authors distinguish the confessional documents developed in this period from the ecumenical creeds by stressing the localized nature of the confessional documents, both geographically and denominationally. The strength of this section lies in the clear elucidation of the various confessions and their origins, and in the larger narrative that locates these individual documents in their broader, inter-confessional contexts. The Lutheran confessional documents are dealt with judiciously and fairly, but the strength of this part is in the narrative concerning the development of the Reformed confessional traditions. The fifth and final portion of this work has to do with the development of confessional documents and tradition since the Reformation, ending with the Barmen Declaration (1934) and some of the recent confessional developments in the Global South.

Not surprisingly (given the specific fields of the authors), the strengths of this volume are in the Patristic and Reformation periods. One criticism of the volume might be that it is actually too strong in these areas, especially in the

Patristic period. There are in the book perhaps too many technical details about the theological controversies attendant around the development of the three ecumenical creeds, at least for general readers. The Reformation section must, by rights, deal with not only the Protestant split from Rome, but also the inter-Protestant divisions of the age. At some points, especially with the Anabaptists (who are explicitly non-creedal), the question arises as to the normative and communal nature of their faith statements; in other words, are some of these documents really confessions of faith in the classical definition?

It is easy to critique a book for what it does not do, and this line of analysis is generally to be avoided. But it seems clear that the final, modern section of the book is the weakest because it is so brief and cursory, not allowing enough room for modern developments since the Reformation. Obviously, these developments are a book in and of themselves, but it might have been better to trim back the Patristic materials and add several more chapters to the modern period.

In the balance, however, this is a book well worth reading and owning. The strengths of the book are evident, and it is clearly conceived and written. If anything, its brief narrative of the post-Reformation period should serve to drive the reader to other, more detailed volumes on the development of Christian theology in the modern period. We owe the authors of this volume a debt of gratitude for their fine work.

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