

# Reviews



**THE END OF YOUTH MINISTRY?  
WHY PARENTS DON'T REALLY  
CARE ABOUT YOUTH GROUPS  
AND WHAT YOUTH WORK-  
ERS SHOULD DO ABOUT IT**, by  
Andrew Root. Grand Rapids: Baker  
Academic, 2020. xiv, 224 pages.  
\$22.99.

Andrew Root's new book *The End of Youth Ministry?* is another valuable contribution to the field. The book has continuity with his previous work and showcases Root's ability to synthesize numerous theoretical voices with solid theological grounding and a generous dose of pop-culture references. It feels equal parts Bonhoeffer, Charles Taylor, and Netflix.

Those familiar with Root's previous work will recognize his favorite dialogue partners and theological priorities brought together in a fresh way. The book takes the form of a semi-fictional narrative (or parable) with the protagonist (Root himself) on a quest for meaning. The crisis is that the primary youth ministry scholar of the past decade and a half has lost his vocational moorings, forcing him to return to the fundamental question of why youth ministry exists at all. This book is aimed squarely at youth ministers who are under pressure and in danger of burning out amid

parents who assume that their job is to entertain rather than to disciple.

Like an investigative reporter, Root embarks on a quest for the purpose of youth ministry. He interviews numerous subjects along the way, including youth ministry colleagues and parents, all to a soundtrack featuring Demi Lovato, Taylor Swift, and Sheryl Crow. He even has a compelling theological conversation with Martin Luther over a beer, thanks to Bill and Ted's time machine. The source serving as his own personal Deep Throat is a pseudonymous youth minister known as J, who holds the ultimate answer to the question he poses in the title, revealing it in a series of encounters and stories that Root has pieced together from real conversations and personal experiences in a way that supports his driving argument.

We eventually come around to an emphatic "no" to the question of whether youth ministry has met its end, but the flow of the narrative works to take the question seriously, as every professional youth minister has done. Root claims that a certain model of youth ministry is over—namely, the youth group from the 1980s and 1990s that was stereotypically centered on fun activities. He expertly identifies the youth group as a historical response to specific circumstances and situates it in a long succession of youth ministry models. The present cultural

reality calls for a new model in response to the intentional slowdown of growing up and the value of personal happiness above all else (which he links to classic hedonism). Root claims, “Youth ministry can have a clear purpose even when the culture is running on hedonistic tracks” (132).

As with any good story, there is a villain. For readers unfamiliar with Root’s commitment to the theology of the cross, it may seem odd that the villain is happiness. His contention is that individual happiness has become the most sought-after good in middle-class Western society (which he identifies as the primary locus of traditional youth ministry), most often associated with personal accomplishments and acquiring new things. The antidote to this poisonous pursuit of personal happiness is joy, and Root spends much of the book making a distinction between joy and happiness.

The character of “J” functions as the archetype of a burned-out youth minister. She began with confidence fresh off a summer working at camp, where she had the ridiculous title “the chief counselor of fun.” She soon discovered that ministry focused solely on fun activities was not ministry at all, and parents began complaining that their children were unhappy, leading to a vocational crisis. I have never met a youth minister who thinks youth ministry is all about fun and happiness. However, I have worked with those who feel stuck in a system that demands from them fun activities when they long to facilitate encounters with Jesus. Youth ministers may often be treated as program coordinators, but they long for something deeper, and Root gives them the theological language to rediscover their purpose.

Root argues that it is misguided for youth ministry to compete for time and space with the myriad of other activities and events available to young people because parents consistently rank things like sports and music as more valuable. In many ways, the parent who does not prioritize youth group or confirmation is another archetype. These parents are real, and Root helpfully provides three concrete examples, but there is more to the story than what he explores.

The parental struggle to balance youth activities is more complex than a simple ranking system, and it is simply untrue that youth ministry inevitably winds up at the bottom of the list, no matter how much it feels this way to frustrated youth ministers. There is a counter-narrative of young people and families who are highly engaged in faith formation and remain willing to put church activities above other commitments. A dive into the empirical research around these families, highlighted in such projects as the National Study of Youth and Religion and The Confirmation Project (among many others), could add nuance to Root’s arguments. The one practical success story that Root provides is inspiring, but the reader is left questioning its authenticity because we have been told that J’s story is a composite of disparate narratives.

Root’s contribution is primarily theoretical, with few practical steps to guide the reader to the concluding scene of an intergenerational group enjoying fellowship at Dairy Queen. The key that he offers is the gift of mutual storytelling. If youth ministers learn only one practical lesson from this tale, it is that they should facilitate intergenerational storytelling, particularly about personal struggles or suffering. In the

sharing of stories and bringing these alongside the biblical narrative, people minister to one another. The challenge is and always has been getting to the point at which people trust one another enough to be vulnerable and share their deep personal stories, like the characters in Root's narrative. The avenues to joy that Root offers are rather extreme situations involving deep suffering, including a child going to prison and a friend/daughter diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. The road to Dairy Queen passes through an experience of shared suffering that cannot be manufactured or programmed.

Root provides an excellent theoretical framework for youth ministers to rethink their ministries. They will nod in agreement with the key virtues of a community of joy: "love, mercy, gratitude, friendship, and compassion" (147). They will reaffirm the importance of getting to the point of sharing personal stories, even if they are left wondering how to get there. Getting there will be dependent on their individual context and circumstances.

Jacob Sorenson

**ORDINARY BLESSINGS: PRAYERS, POEMS, AND MEDITATIONS FOR EVERYDAY LIFE**, by Meta Herrick Carlson. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2020. 168 pages. \$12.89.

As it turns out, Pastor Meta Herrick Carlson wrote two books in one. The editors at Fortress Press wisely culled *Ordinary Blessings* from her forthcoming book, *Speak It Plain*. *Ordinary Blessings* is meant to be shared, read, and

given to everyone. *Speak It Plain* offers liturgy and prayers for use in worship and pastoral care. For practitioners of ministry, both volumes will be of great help in wading into the lives of all kinds of people.

Though a mere 168 pages, minus some blank ones, *Ordinary Blessings* is by no means a quick or easy read. The words offered fall somewhere between prayer and poetry and need to be slowly peeled back, like an orange, and savored a section at a time. These blessings are both sweet and nourishing. The sweetness exists in the widening understanding of human experience. The nourishment is in the thoughtfulness Carlson employs to expand the traditional categories and purposes of blessing.

In "Blessings for Everyday Life," Carlson includes, among others, meditations for morning anxiety, the bus stop, grocery shopping, and paying bills:

may we consume with care,  
pay what is right,  
challenge power with justice  
until everyone can pay with  
dignity. (14–15)

In "Blessings for Loving Yourself," Carlson explores recognizing that you're good enough, taking a media break, celebrating the healed self.

In "Blessings for Loving Others," Carlson urges us toward the neighbor with blessings for empathy, attending a wedding, deciding to go to the funeral, and sitting near small children on an airplane:

These are the trench years  
of sacrificial love,  
somewhere in between  
making family memories and  
my desire for peace and  
quiet. (49)

In “Blessings for Living with Each Other,” we find prayers for bullies and those bullied, for rejecting the fear of others, and these lines from “For the Nation”:

And so we keep breathing  
and labor  
through these contractions  
of civilization—  
shouting in pain  
pushing on instinct  
Desperate to meet the one  
we are still making,  
to hear her cry out  
alive and free. (56)

In “Blessings for Authenticity,” the author blesses discernment, imposter syndrome, making music, and coming out.

Perhaps the most notable section of the book is “Blessings for Hard Things.” Carlson considers things people can’t often speak about: miscarriage, divorce, overdose, generational trauma, and losing a peer:

It is tempting to hold God  
accountable for loss,  
to assume a divine plan in  
the works,  
to bandage over the raw  
sting of grief,  
to hustle back to a sense of  
normalcy,  
but we will resist. (88)

In “Blessings for Bodies,” we find blessings for weight gain, a new diagnosis, menstruation, and looking in the mirror:

I am dust and stars!  
The world’s joy and despair  
tangle me wild and holy,  
And all I know is I am not  
nearly done  
being beautiful. (99)

“Blessings for Work” includes reflects on beginning, changing, losing, and retiring from work. Here, Carlson offers poems and prayers written for friends and colleagues, including one for packing up your office:

You will wonder if it was  
enough  
and it was.  
You will hope they feel blessed  
and they do.  
You will pack up second  
guessing a few things  
but it is time.  
Go forth with gratitude and  
a peaceful mind. (117)

“Blessings for Turning Points” explores moving, sending a child into the world, hitting rock bottom, and achieving one day sober:

God can use  
your weariness, your rage,  
your humility  
as instruments of healing,  
but your shame can produce  
nothing. (125)

“Blessings for Important People” include godparents, grandparents, children, mentors, caregivers, and peacemakers. While “Blessings for B-list Holidays” rounds out the volume by acknowledging oft-forgotten but essential days such as Tax Day, Daylight-Saving Time, and one joint blessing for the often anguished-over Mother’s Day and the often overlooked Father’s Day:

We give thanks for the  
parents  
who embody great love,  
who transcend gender  
stereotypes,



who are still becoming  
thanks to parenthood.  
(161)

These pages are filled with thoughtfulness, creativity, humor, and tender honesty. Life has hardships, joys, and ordinary tasks that are often discarded from memory. None of us is immune to the human experience. While life uncovers dilemmas unique to each person, we share in our experience of struggle.

The words Carlson uses are not meant for instruction, but to heal and guide. Like a wise friend, these words come to sit and stay a while. Each blessing is meant to meet the reader where they are and accompany them until the next point. These meditations, prayers, and

poems remind us how to be human, and that we are only human. *Ordinary Blessings* erases the supposed boundary between sacred and secular, reminding us that God shows up in all sorts of places and moments.

In this slim but powerful volume, Carlson, in effect, offers “notes to self” that point us to one another. She invites the reader into the ubiquity of belonging, a belonging that is not merited by stature or status, calendar or calloused hands, but rather a salience of being. These meditations invite us to truly show up in our own lives and in the lives of one another—and to bless each other as we do so.

Jeni Grangaard  
Luther Seminary



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**A BOUNDLESS GOD: THE SPIRIT ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT**, by Jack Levison. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020. xiv, 194 pages. \$21.99.

A couple of years ago, I made the foolhardy decision, as young people who still believe they are infallible do, to ride a snowmobile across a lake in a mild blizzard. I ended up riding too far south and had to turn north with the wind blowing in my face. My visor had to be up so the snow would not cake on the plastic and block my vision. With my sight limited both by the snow in my eyes and by the snow blocking the view of any landmarks, I made it to my destination. The power of the wind and snow hitting my face, blinding me, is a memory that will stay with me and serve as a reminder that wind, especially wind like that, is something with which we should not trifle.

Just so, Jack Levison, in his book *A Boundless God: The Spirit according to the Old Testament*, takes the word *rûah*, the Hebrew word for “wind/spirit/breath,” with a seriousness deserved by a noun that appears frequently in the Hebrew Bible. A clearly laid-out table included in the book shows just how dominant the word is. *Rûah* appears 389 times, according to Levison, with the next most abundant noun, the Hebrew word for “covenant,” appearing only 287 times. With a little whimsy, Levison converts the number of uses for the most common nouns in the Hebrew Bible into the height of some of the major architectural landmarks in the world. *Rûah* towers over the rest as the Empire State Building.

Throughout the book, Levison makes a case for his compelling argument that understanding *rûah* is vital to understanding the Christian faith. He takes

the reader on a journey through the Hebrew Bible—a term he uses interchangeably with *Old Testament* and *Jewish Scripture*. He explores how *rûah* was used and evolved with the Israelites’ ever-changing understanding of breath/wind/spirit. Not just their changing understanding, but the complexity of *rûah*, was so real for the Israelites that the layers of meaning behind it, as Levison discusses, are omnipresent throughout the Hebrew Bible.

He describes how in Judges that *rûah*, or spirit, may have been a force of violence (though he also discusses an argument against *rûah* as a force of violence: that, rather, it was a force that tried to prevent violence). He talks about *rûah* as the breath of life and mentions dry bones enough to get that old spiritual stuck in the reader’s head.

Ezekiel connected dem dry  
bones,  
Ezekiel connected dem dry  
bones,  
Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry  
Bones—  
Now hear the word of the  
Lord.

And now it’s stuck in your head too.

All the characters we know and love seem to have *rûah* as a necessary part of their stories. Moses appears often. Levison cleverly describes the subtle shift in *rûah* in the transition from the time of the judges to the time of the kings. Many of the prophets are discussed. *Rûah* really does permeate the Hebrew Bible, and Levison does a successful job of describing and delving into the intricacies of such a heavy word.

This author describes the complexity of *rûah* succinctly in the first chapter, and if the following quote catches your interest, then this book is for you: “It is

impossible to capture in English translation the drama of the original Hebrew, where all three English words *breath*, *wind*, and *spirit* are one: *rûah*” (31). It seems to me a daunting task to describe that complexity in 182 pages, yet Levison does an admirable job. Though at times the book reads a little heavy, and some paragraphs seem to go on, it remains fairly accessible. The book’s structure is easy to follow and builds on Levison’s premise adeptly. Which one would expect of an author who has been published several times before (a fact the reader will be quick to pick up on, if the reader checks the footnotes).

For the pastor who has always felt there must be more than what their translation of the Bible offers; for the Old Testament professor looking for a book to assign to their class; for the seminarian wanting to explore the intricacies of Hebrew beyond their language class; for the lay member looking to expand and delve deeper into their beliefs—*A Boundless God* could easily serve as a helpful resource. For anyone who has experienced the power of wind, the breath of life, something at night that makes you wonder, “Is this the spirit?”—this book can bring a theological lens to a force and a word that permeates our Scripture and our life.

Though the power of the wind in my snowmobile ride came to mind as I read this book, Levison reminded me, and reminds his readers, that sometimes silence is just as powerful as a gale. He writes in the conclusion: “It is a necessary fault of a book that it is filled with words when, occasionally at least, only silence will do” (158). That same fault lies in book reviews as well. So I want to suggest to you, dear reader: Take a moment in silence. Feel the air around you. Maybe look out a window and see

the wind blowing through some trees. Take a moment.

Life is so complex. Life cannot exist without breath, trees could not stand without the wind pushing and strengthening them, our faith could not be without the Spirit. Levison shows us that the ancient Israelites had a keen wondering about *rûah*, and if you wonder about it too, pick up this book and learn of its depth.

Alexander G. Ohman  
Pelican Rapids, Minnesota

**SCHLEIERMACHER AND PALMER:  
THE FATHER AND MOTHER OF  
THE MODERN PROTESTANT  
MINDSET**, by Justin A. Davis.  
Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019. 228  
pages. \$28.00.

When I saw *Schleiermacher and Palmer: The Father and Mother of the Modern Protestant Mindset* by Justin Davis on a new-book list a few months ago, I was intrigued. Naming Friedrich Schleiermacher the father of the modern Protestant mindset is not surprising. His importance to modern Christianity, particularly the liberal tradition, has long been accepted. Naming Phoebe Palmer, the nineteenth-century revivalist and author, as the mother of the modern Protestant mindset, however, was an unexpected claim, and I wanted to read Davis’s argument.

The structure of the book is straightforward and easy to follow. After a short introduction, Davis explores Schleiermacher’s life and theology in the first and second chapters respectively. These chapters were a good primer on the man, his context, his theology, and his



influence. Davis cites Schleiermacher's work frequently throughout the chapters so a reader could easily go to Schleiermacher's writings to dive deeper into his theology, if desired.

The third chapter explores Palmer's biography, and the fourth chapter is about her theology. These chapters follow a similar structure to the two previous ones about Schleiermacher. Again, the reader gets a relatively concise biography followed by an explanation of Palmer's theology. The biography of Palmer is particularly well done—one of the best I have read. Davis's account of her revivals in the British Isles are especially engaging. His examination of Palmer's contributions as an early feminist thinker is also of interest.

The fifth chapter explores what Davis calls the direct heirs of Schleiermacher and Palmer: the Holiness movement, Pentecostalism, and Liberalism. The chapter first traces Palmer's theology through Oberlin, Keswick, the rejection of Holiness in some mainstream churches, and then Pentecostalism. Davis then moves to looking at Schleiermacher's theological influence in Liberal and neo-Liberal thought. Finally, the sixth chapter looks at Fundamentalism and Neo-Orthodoxy, what Davis refers to as "qualified heirs to Schleiermacher and Palmer." This last chapter was the weakest, and the connections felt a bit strained.

In his introduction Davis states, "While both theologians lived in a time of dramatic change, their lives followed similar patterns, sharing a remarkably similar biographical outline" (xvi). However, the book goes on to describe two remarkably different people with different theology and life experiences. Schleiermacher was a German academic. Palmer was an American wife

and mother (I mention this fact because it makes her career even more remarkable in the nineteenth century) who did not receive formal theological training but built an impressive career as a revivalist and writer. The claimed similarities are overshadowed by their differences. As a result, at times the book feels like two separate volumes—one about Schleiermacher and one about Palmer—that have been forced together.

After finishing the book, I am still not convinced of Palmer's place as the mother of the modern Protestant mindset. However, Davis does demonstrate her influence and lasting importance to theology, and I appreciate his willingness to bring more female voices into this conversation. In the final analysis, I enjoyed the book. It was a quick read and very accessible. If you are looking for a primer on either Schleiermacher or Palmer (or both!), or if you enjoy digging a little deeper into the lives and theology of historical Christian figures, I recommend it to you.

Jennifer Wojciechowski  
Luther Seminary

**ABORTION AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION: A PRO-CHOICE THEOLOGICAL ETHIC**, by Margaret D. Kamitsuka. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019. 258 pages. \$35.00 (paper).

*Abortion and the Christian Tradition* is Margaret Kamitsuka's attempt to craft a pro-choice argument that is grounded in classical Christian texts and symbols. The book itself is divided into two parts: a critique of pro-life arguments (chapters 1–4) followed by her own constructive



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proposals (chapters 5–7). Kamitsuka's argument is founded on two claims: that the fetus is valuable and has moral weight beginning at the point of conception, but that the woman's "maternal authority" bestows upon her the moral status to end the fetus's life.

Given the deeply fraught nature of the abortion debate in the American context, our goal is to address Kamitsuka's argument with both charity and candor, recognizing the difficult ethical waters she is attempting to navigate. With all that said, we are of the opinion that this book contains numerous deeply flawed arguments that need to be identified and vigorously challenged.

Kamitsuka makes a number of important observations and critiques about contemporary pro-life discourse, especially in chapters 1–4. For example, in chapter 1, she rightly criticizes a tendency within pro-life circles to assume that church history bears witness to an "unyielding condemnation of abortion and a univocal view of the sanctity of fetal life" (17). In particular she notes that greater emphasis was traditionally laid on the sexual sin leading to the circumstances of the abortion than on the inherent value of the fetus—though it remains a fact that, whatever the status of the fetus, the church univocally regarded abortion as wrong. Church history is complicated, and so much of what we know is limited by the small number of sources that survived the passage of time. In our view, the pro-life movement would benefit from a more honest retelling of church history, accounting for the variety of views held over the centuries. The ethical validity of an argument does not depend upon its historical genealogy, but rather on its truthfulness.

We are also in agreement with Kamitsuka's assessment that churches on the

whole have done a poor job of making themselves trustworthy and caring spaces for mothers with difficult or unwanted pregnancies. Whatever the circumstances, pregnancy results in tremendous burdens to the mother, which she bears alone in far too many situations. And yet, even if church leaders wish to support and accompany mothers in this journey, Kamitsuka is dismissive and judgmental of such efforts on the grounds that they have "little chance of actually helping women with unwanted pregnancies" (169). From her vantage point, churches should be discouraged from helping mothers pursue adoption (an option she doesn't even mention until page 130!), because "few women who go through with an unwanted pregnancy can bear to relinquish the baby for adoption" (169). Given her emphasis on listening to the voices of women, it is puzzling that this detail does not carry more weight in her larger moral calculation.

Kamitsuka clearly and compellingly argues in favor of fetal value, especially in chapter 5 ("Maternal Authority and Fetal Value"). She begins that argument with a critique of several pro-choice paradigms (see, especially, pp. 121–127) that deny or denigrate the value of a fetus. One view argues that pregnancy and motherhood are not coterminous. A "maternal consciousness" (125) must first be developed before the woman can enter from biological pregnancy into motherhood. Prior to the development of this consciousness, the mother is exempted from responsibilities to the fetus. This view develops out of a simplistic body-subjectivity dualism in which "the pregnant flesh may be hospitable to an embryo, but the subjective will of the woman may wish to 'override' the flesh" (125). From a slightly different angle, other scholars argue that gestational

hospitality is not required until “an experience of alterity” occurs, whereby the fetus becomes a genuine “other.” Kamitsuka is on target when she states, “I have misgivings about grounding the morality of abortion on the notion of a woman’s supposedly pre-maternal, pre-ethical subjectivity in early pregnancy or her ‘bracketed’ state of fleshly hospitality distinct from motherhood” (127).

Finding these views inadequate, Kamitsuka argues that pregnancy, from start to finish, should in fact “be seen as a unique state of a mothering relationship—gestational mothering” (127). With special attention to ethnographic literature, she notes that “linking abortion with mothering acknowledges the experiences of many women whose difficult decision to abort is made precisely from a mothering perspective” (128). Drawing on Soran Reader, Kamitsuka sees “pregnancy as a time when a woman is fully engaged in ethical maternal decision making . . . because it automatically constitutes her as someone from whom mothering decisions are required” (128). At several points Kamitsuka is refreshingly honest when she urges pro-choice advocates “to acknowledge honestly that abortion is a decision not just to end a pregnancy but is also a decision not to have a being come into the world to whom one has a mothering obligation. For this reason, abortion must be starkly defined morally as a decision to kill a living being in utero—a momentous decision that only the gestating mother has the authority to make” (131). She makes a similar point in a subsequent chapter: “To end the life of a contingent and contiguous human organism is not like losing one’s tonsils. A fetus, at any stage, carries moral weight because it is a living and genetically human being that is developing intimately connected to its mother until birth” (153).

Kamitsuka bases her argument for fetal value on four claims: (1) the fetus is “genetically human”; (2) “it is an organism not just in stasis but also living dynamically; (3) “it is intimately connected—contingently and contiguously—to an already existing moral agent who takes on risks in pregnancy”; and (4) “it has the potential to reach born personhood” (151). It is unfortunate that more pro-choice advocates do not follow in Kamitsuka’s footsteps and acknowledge more honestly the realities of abortion and its consequences, rather than hiding those realities behind conscience-assuaging euphemisms.

We are grateful for Kamitsuka’s honesty in labeling abortion for what it is: the killing of a living human organism that would otherwise have a future and a life on this earth (see, again, her comments on p. 131). But her moral conviction about the value of the fetus ultimately gives way to a greater concern, which is the unqualified protection of the individual woman’s choice to abort. She opposes any and all restraint on this matter—cultural, societal, or legal: “I claim that a fetus has value, but I support a woman’s maternal authority to abort it . . . I am not asserting fetal value to serve as a restraint for maternal authority, which is how pro-life claims for fetal personhood function” (153). For Kamitsuka, what needs protection is choice, not the living fetus. Nothing seems to elicit greater moral horror in Kamitsuka than the prospect of a woman coerced, pressured, or even morally and emotionally urged into keeping a pregnancy that she has determined she doesn’t want. However, she does not once engage the multiple and equally horrifying ways women are coerced, pressured, and urged into aborting a pregnancy they do want—from the individual unsupportive



father who wants to solve his own paternity with a quick surgery, to the structural and social preference for boys in places like India and China that has led to the mass-scale abortion and infanticide of females. Even if we bracket the moral and ontological status of the fetus, this seems to us like a seriously biased presentation of what she takes to be the core issue.

Kamitsuka's constructive argument invites several additional critiques. As noted above, it is commendable and exceptional that she acknowledges the moral value of the fetus throughout the pregnancy process (141). Having made this argument, however, she struggles to define what precisely the human fetus is. In her words, a fetus is "not a person and not a nonperson" (144; see also 122). This awkwardly formulated statement represents an attempt to thread a philosophical needle within the larger abortion debate, where the definition of "personhood" is highly contested. On the one hand, she wants to affirm the value of the fetus throughout the entirety of the pregnancy, thereby avoiding the requirement to determine when precisely the fetus achieves "personhood." Somewhat counterintuitively, she needs the fetus to have value precisely so that she can award to the mother alone the right to determine its future and not, say, a doctor (who could make a judgment about mere "tissue"). On the other hand, she cannot allow the fetus to become so valuable as to warrant protection from death by abortion. These are her Scylla and Charybdis, and in our judgment she fails to navigate these dangerous waters.

Kamitsuka's definition of fetal value is certainly an improvement over many pro-choice arguments, which often flatly deny the fetus any sort of moral respect.

And yet, even with her nuanced claims, Kamitsuka still turns the fetus into a second-class human being that is unworthy of moral respect, rights, or protection. This move places her in unfortunate historical company, as many of humanity's worst atrocities have been enabled by eloquent and nuanced denials of personhood to a subset of the human family. Kamitsuka's unwavering and dogmatic commitment to "choice" forces her into this situation. She wants to grant value to the fetus, but not so much value that it actually has a moral claim on the mother. The mother owes the fetus nothing, and apparently neither does society.

We don't deny that there are some situations in which mothers need to make difficult moral decisions (e.g., endangerment of the mother's life) and in which the ethical calculus requires one to weigh life against life. In such situations, the mother is likely the most suitable agent for making such life-and-death decisions. But these crisis situations are by no means the norm among those who seek abortion, and they should not govern abortion ethics generally. From our perspective, the fetus should enjoy the rights and protections afforded to every other human being in society, including the right not to have their life forcibly taken simply because they are unwanted or inconvenient. Other options exist if a mother genuinely cannot care for the child, and in such situations, churches should take Kamitsuka's critique of churches to heart and do all that they can to create a hospitable environment in which both mother and child can flourish.

Throughout the book, Kamitsuka rightly draws attention to the enormously disproportionate burden—even risk—that women bear for engaging in sexual activity. In 2008, 94.1 percent of



pregnancies resulted in complications, and pregnancy-related deaths in the US have been on the rise between 1987 and 2011 (149). While pregnancy is the natural means by which humans reproduce, it is nonetheless “naturally dangerous” (149), even in modern Western countries. And these numbers only focus on the pregnancy and delivery itself, not even mentioning the emotional and financial sacrifices parents (and especially single mothers) have to make for their children.

These realities lead us to urge greater reflection in the church on a number of painful questions of theodicy. Why are women blessed with equally great intelligence and talents but then for almost all of human history have borne the role of motherhood to the exclusion of almost all else? Why should the pleasure of sex be “punished” again and again with ever-multiplying bodily demands and personal responsibilities? Why have other people, and primarily men, had the right to control female bodies, which are already so vulnerable to sexual assault and the burden of pregnancy? Why does pregnancy have to be so disproportionately dangerous? Ultimately, why does God create and sustain a world that is so brutish and dangerous, especially for women?

The disproportionate burdens and curtailed possibilities for women are demoralizing and outrageous, and they force a hard reckoning with divine intent, as so many other horrors of this created world have prompted. But we would suggest that the question at stake, then, is whether any of these injustices is actually ameliorated by granting to women the power to be God over their own fetuses. Doing so simply transfers the weight of injustice borne by the

mother onto the fetus, which has even less agency and power than she does. At the end of the day, Kamitsuka’s argument not only fails to address the injustices she so deftly identifies, but it also amplifies the injustice by shifting the suffering onto the fetus, to which she refuses to grant the status of “personhood.”

This leads to a final comment about Kamitsuka’s argument. It is undergirded throughout by appeals to Christology and Christian discipleship that are, in our judgment, even more flawed than the rest of her argumentation. A specious Nestorian Christology excuses any serious reckoning with the reality of the fetal Christ by claiming that the incarnation does not reach its culmination until Jesus’s death, effectively conflating incarnation with deification (the latter her choice of term). It is a telling mistake, in our judgment, that she does not separate the person of Christ from the work of Christ, and regards the former to be real only in light of the latter.

It is not surprising, then, that her description of the Christian life is likewise so biased toward the agential—toward “work” over “person”—that not only are fetuses excluded from the status of true disciples but logically, it seems to us, so too are born children and, for that matter, nearly all adults! These reflections on her part expose at root not a theology of the blessed receptivity of creatures of God, whose given personhood is the gracious basis for their emergent works, but the solipsistic sovereign self of modernity, which makes “choices,” apart from any community with God or other persons, in order to achieve personal value. It is very hard for us to regard this perspective as the freedom for which Christ set us free and not simply as self-deceived collusion with the harsh grindings of a

market and political system that regard all human beings, fetuses included, as disposable when dependent, inefficient, or inconvenient.

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson  
Tokyo Lutheran Church

Michael J. Chan  
Luther Seminary

**THE WORD MADE FLESH: A THEOLOGY OF THE INCARNATION**, by Ian A. McFarland. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019. 260 pages. \$35.00 (paper).

Ian A. McFarland's work *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation* plumbs the depths of Chalcedonian theology to discover a rich field of inquiry into the incarnation. Arguing for what he calls a "Chalcedonianism without reserve," (3) McFarland engages in a wide discussion about both the promises and pitfalls of seeking to describe Christ in his two natures. Taking a cue from Luther's caution that "whoever wishes to speculate soundly about God should absolutely disregard everything except the humanity of Christ," (6) the book states that "when we look at Jesus, what we see is his humanity only. . . . Yet this claim need not entail any qualification of the confession that Jesus is God" (6). For McFarland, the humanity of Jesus is what defines how we understand the incarnation and need not be a stumbling block for those who wish to understand the divine at work in Jesus. Nor is the humanity of Jesus a limit that we heed by only paying attention to Jesus's historicity and moral teachings. The human Jesus is the manifestation of the divine in

creation. *The Word Made Flesh* attempts to make sense of the seeming paradox of this thesis.

The Trinitarian distinction between *hypostasis* and *nature* allows McFarland to make this claim. He provides a helpful summary of classical Trinitarian doctrine. The nature of something reveals *what* it is while the hypostasis of something reveals *who* it is. Thus there is "no inconsistency in affirming that the hypostasis of the particular instance of human nature known as Jesus of Nazareth is divine" (8). Jesus is a human *what* with a divine *who*. To say that we perceive anything of divinity in its imperceptible and invisible nature somehow within or outside of Jesus is, for McFarland, a troublesome claim because it causes us to look outside of what Scripture and the creeds reveal about Jesus. The hypostasis, McFarland notes, drawing on John of Damascus, "is not any kind of third thing that links the natures by standing above, behind, or between them . . . but just the particular one who subsists in and as the natures" (90).

McFarland develops the central thesis of a "Chalcedonianism without reserve" through a wide reflection of its implications. McFarland assembles an impressive array of authors such as Aquinas, Maximus the Confessor, Karl Barth, and contemporary thought leaders in Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox traditions. He is also not averse to mentioning in passing scientific and speculative realities, like the multiple-universe theory, and bringing them to bear in his narrative. At times the pace can be intimidating, especially for the author of this review who has had no post-seminary training in theology. McFarland's discipline and gifts as a teacher are evident in the succinct arguments and clear transitions between subjects. Most

tangential material and even the more developed quotations were confined to very interesting footnotes. This work succeeds in every teacher's goal, enticing the student to dig more deeply.

Where the work appears to be conservative in nature by not attempting to make entirely novel or sensational claims, it remains engaging. McFarland's text is like trying to get to a familiar place by traveling on new and unused roads. The first two chapters give an account of divinity and creatures respectively in order to demonstrate the breadth of the divide that the incarnation overcomes. Nicholas of Cusa's definition of God as "not Other" (*non Aliud*), or not just another creature, means that God cannot become a creature. The unknown cannot simply become the known, lost in the diversity and fundamental limitation of creatures. After explaining the problem, McFarland looks, in the third chapter, at what Chalcedonian theology does to describe the incarnation. The hypostasis does not stand "above, behind, or between" the two natures of Jesus but is the "particular one who subsists in and as the natures" (90).

The subsequent chapters apply this argument by slowing down to look at Jesus in the biblical testimony. McFarland points out in chapter 4 how Jesus accords with and fulfills the promise of the revelation of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. A detailed exegesis about the activities of the human Jesus follows in the next chapter. Gospel stories provide an extension of the theological account of Jesus's humanity beyond the "born and died" confessions of the creeds into the entirety of Jesus's ministry of teaching, healing, and befriending. This exegetical shift becomes important in the sixth chapter. Spending time on the resurrection, ascension, and second coming,

McFarland is careful to claim that these are not a continuation of the Jesus narrative as extra events that happen to Jesus. Instead, they are a "declaration of God's verdict on the life that ended on Good Friday . . . not a quantitative extension of Jesus's life but rather its qualitative transformation: the declaration that he lives, but in a new mode, as God lives" (167). The implication of Christ's "new mode" of living bridges to the seventh chapter. Christ's presence continues in our own lives through the church, the sacraments, and the immanent presence of Christ, which, in the words of Maximus the Confessor, "seeks always and everywhere to effect the mystery of his embodiment" (206).

McFarland's most evangelical prose rewards the reader in this final section. Here we find out about a consequential choice made in presenting this material. Choosing to "avoid the conceptual bifurcation of his person and work" and focus on the "concrete particularity" (216) of Jesus, the author presents an ambitious and engaging account of the incarnation. The great bridge between Creator and creature present in the Word made flesh is the great drama of the book. The humanity of Jesus, according to Luther, matters because it bridges an even greater divide between God and the sinner. Jesus described as a particular event and explored through divine attributes cannot become good news for me until that event becomes proclaimed for me as forgiveness and new life. Jesus himself says that we approach his person by believing "the works themselves" (John 14:11).

McFarland emphasizes the importance of preaching and forgiveness in our own encounter with Christ but supports them with only short references to the distinction between God

hidden and God revealed and the blessed exchange. By collapsing the salvation Jesus brings into the “concrete particularity” of the person of Jesus, the work of Jesus becomes the mere resolution of divine logic. The soteriological drama involved in Jesus’s work seems to play a distant second fiddle to the ontological drama of the union of the two natures in Christ’s person. The death on the cross becomes only a judgment on sin and a punctuation mark for the human life of Jesus as McFarland hesitates to claim that any place in the human life of Jesus is more connected to humanity than any other. The cross becomes hidden for McFarland in the incarnation and only present to us as a judgment that the world would treat God this way. Scripture does not make this hesitation about the uniqueness of

the cross, as narratives of the Gospels constantly drive toward the cross and the letters of Paul drive back to it in reflecting on the life of Jesus.

McFarland’s “Chalcedonianism without reserve” is a useful and powerful correction to those who would preach above him to the divine or past him to some other possibility for the human. The book is an able, powerful, and at times poignant defense of Jesus as God’s presence, revealing God to us as a particular human being. But as with any theology, even powerful theology like this, it is left to the preacher to make this presence matter for us in the concrete particularity of our own human lives.

Matthew Metevelis  
Reformation Lutheran Church  
Las Vegas, Nevada