

Book Reviews

***A New Song We Now Begin: Celebrating the Half Millennium of Lutheran Hymnals 1524–2024.* Edited by Robin A. Leaver. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2024. 301 pages. Paperback. \$39.00.**

There are many reasons for the proliferation of Luther's theology in 16th-century Europe. Certainly his own writings, translations, and liturgical reforms played a significant role in this phenomenon. No less significant, however, was Luther's advocacy for hymnal production. Beginning with the *Achtleiderbuch* of 1524, a steady stream of hymnals and hymnal-related resources were disseminated across European lands. This trend continued in North America as Lutherans settled the new world with hymnal, Bible, and catechism in hand. In *A New Song We Now Begin*, Robin Leaver and a cast of scholars analyze these developments, beginning with the first Lutheran hymnals of the 16th century and continuing to the present day.

The volume is organized as a series of essays, highlighting various regions, histories, and movements within Lutheranism related to the development of its hymnals. The book is divided into two large sections: the first, "The German Background," analyzes the historic development of the German hymnals up to the mid-1800s, while the second, "Influential American Hymnals," focuses on American trends from the late 1800s onward.

The first section (2–6) highlights a history of hymnal development that will be familiar to many. While not as well-known as other Reformation-era histories, the story of the proliferation of hymnals throughout the Reformation has been discussed before.¹ What is particularly striking is Paul Grime's observation of the intentional effort put forth by Luther to use the hymnal, in conjunction with the catechism and prayerbook, to educate and form the laity. This section moves from broad historical strokes (chapters 2–3) to more niche discussions on musical developments (chapter 4) and analysis of specific hymnbooks which were indicative of broader cultural and historical trends in Europe (chapters 5 and 6).

The second section rehearses a more recent history that has a felt significance for many modern-day Lutherans. The effort of various ethnic Lutherans to assimilate themselves to a more ecumenical American culture is made apparent in both Vieker's article on Walther's hymnal as well as Grindahl's on Scandinavian hymnody. In the next several chapters (8, 10–11) on the *Common Service Book and Hymnal* (Westermeyer), the move from *The Service Book and Hymnal* to *Lutheran Book*

¹ Some examples include Leaver's own *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007) and *The Whole Church Sings: Congregational Singing in Luther's Wittenberg* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2017).

of *Worship* (Granquist), and *Worship Supplement 69* (Zager), the emphasis is placed upon a Lutheran desire for unity across synods as well as the “explosion” of hymn writing that came to characterize the twentieth century. In the final chapter, Zager and Leaver offer a “CliffsNotes”-style overview of hymnals from the mid-nineties to the present. The careful reader will by implication be able to glean the theological predilections of the various Lutheran bodies in America simply by reading these summaries.

While *A New Song* is certainly worthy of a cover-to-cover read, it can also serve as a valuable reference tool for anyone seriously interested in Lutheran church history and hymnody. This volume forces the reader to contemplate the essential place the hymnal has occupied for Lutherans for five hundred years and to consider how it might continue to do so for five hundred more.

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***Sound Theology: Pipe Organ Power Plays among Protestants, Pulpits, Professors, and Peers.* By Randall Dean Engle. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024. 248 pages. Paperback. \$32.00.**

Most anyone who has studied Reformation history is aware of the restrictions that John Calvin and others in the Reformed communion placed on the role of music in the church. Unlike the Lutheran reformers, who drew on a wide range of sources—including Psalms, Latin hymns, medieval German songs, and sixteenth-century ballads—to build a stunning repertoire of congregational hymns, Calvin insisted on singing only the Psalms in metered verse. In its own way, the *Genevan Psalter* (1562) was a remarkable achievement, especially with regard to the wide variety of meters and tunes it contained. As for the accompaniment of those Psalms, instrumental music was, for the most part, forbidden. While much of Lutheran congregational singing went unaccompanied in the early years, it was seldom prohibited, and gave way soon enough to a rich practice of accompaniment by organ and other instruments.

What is less known (at least by this reviewer) is the debate over these restrictions that ensued within the Reformed camp. To that end, Randall Dean Engle's *Sound Theology* quite successfully sheds light on the dispute that raged in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Drawing on a vast array of original sources, including considerable archival material translated

by the author, Engle takes the reader on a remarkable journey that brings to light the politics and passions that drove much of the controversy.

A helpful insight that the author provides at numerous points is the inherent clash that existed between the church and the political establishment. Following the weakening of Spanish hegemony over the Netherlands late in the sixteenth century, a system of governance emerged that prevented the burgeoning Reformed confession from exercising control as the Roman Church had in previous times. The result: civic authorities who frequently pushed back against the dictates of the church. Their ability to do so was aided by the fact that they, and not the congregations, owned and operated the church buildings.

Engle's richly alliterative subtitle, *Pipe Organ Power Plays among Protestants, Pulpits, Professors, and Peers*, nicely captures the substance of his study, namely, that the use of the organ in Reformed worship was far from uniform. Following three chapters that set the stage and provide useful background, the author proceeds to examine in some detail three case studies. The overarching theme of the overview is that there was a significant divergence—both in time and place—in the application of the Reformed proscription against the use of the organ. The presbyterian form of church governance that emerged after independence from Spain often carried with it many of the local customs. Among those customs was a deep appreciation for, and even pride in, the pipe organ. Even as religious leaders pressed their case against the organ by asserting that the issue was not merely a matter of *adiaphora* but actually one of essential doctrine, civic officials carried on by shielding their instruments and promoting their use.

Arguments against the use of the organ frequently focused on the frivolous settings that sounded before and after the service. Equally contentious was the accompaniment of Psalm singing by the organ. Proponents of the organ countered the latter charge by asserting that unaccompanied singing of the Psalm hymns was abysmal and required the leadership of the organ if there was ever to be any sense of order in the service. Both opponents and proponents of the organ made copious appeals to the Scriptures as well as to interpretations of those references through the ages.

The lengths both sides went to in order to make their case sometimes tested the limits of Christian decorum. Preachers, for example, routinely preached against the use of the organ, only to be ignored by the city magistrates (90). In places where the civic authorities dictated that the organ be used, some pastors would exit the church before the postlude as a form of protest. As retaliation, the pastors were sometimes fined. (92). In one case, the civic authorities authorized the construction of a new organ and then hired a Roman Catholic organist to play it (95)! In another case, an organist got especially creative during the Psalm singing by improvising interludes between stanzas. In response, those in the congregation who opposed the organ

protested by closing their hymnbooks, putting their hats back on, and sitting down (102). In the case of Jan Calckman, his opposition to the organ was so severe that the church council not only reprimanded him but banned him from the altar for a year (163). Churches regularly hired bailiffs to patrol the grounds during Saturday organ concerts (168). And strangest of all, they would sometimes pay off “dog beaters,” who apparently caused disturbances by mistreating their animals during concerts (168).

Though *Sound Theology* is a narrow study on a topic that may not suggest immediate application to the pastor’s calling, there is much that one can learn. Conversations about frivolity in worship, for example, still abound. Navigating the contentious waters of *adiaphora* remains a treacherous business. That the Reformed Church averted a schism over this centuries-long debate suggests that we too can address important matters of church practice without having to express our disapproval by the donning of hats or the beating of dogs!

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***AI Shepherds and Electric Sheep: Leading and Teaching in the Age of Artificial Intelligence.* By Sean O’Callaghan and Paul A. Hoffman. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024. 187 pages. Paperback. \$24.99.**

No one is startled to discover that the world of one’s youth differs markedly from the present. Yet the velocity and character of change in the past few years—driven by the sudden integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into nearly every domain of human activity—feels historically unprecedented, and compels us to re-examine foundational questions of human identity, agency, creativity, and vocation.

Into this age of disorientation comes *AI Shepherds and Electric Sheep* by Sean O’Callaghan and Paul A. Hoffman, a timely guide that seeks to reorient Christians toward a conscientious use of AI in light of our identity as humans bearing the *imago Dei*. Here the authors give an accessible overview of a complex and controversial topic, clearly defining types of AI, assessing its societal impacts, calling for virtuous habits, and leading readers into Scripture—all with impressive clarity.

However, this clarity makes the vagueness at the book’s heart all the more surprising. When exploring human identity through the biblical narrative, sin is illustrated by racism, classism, sexism, and similar “-isms,” while the Christian telos is framed as pursuing “human flourishing” and bringing *shalom*—peace, perfection, harmonization—to social structures. These are broad, elastic terms that can too

easily be stretched to fit almost any narrative. Nonetheless, thoughtful reflection questions close every chapter which openly invite critique of the authors' positions. This in and of itself demonstrates that the purpose of this book is not to answer every question in the discussion, but to bring awareness that there is a discussion, and to provoke thoughtfulness concerning it. For pastors, educators, or any Christian wrestling with AI's place in ministry and life, this book is a helpful entry point into the conversation. Readers may not agree with every opinion stated, but they will be stirred to think—and that is the point.

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***Faithful and Flourishing: Strategies for Leading Your Christian School with Excellence.* By Bernard Bull. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2025. 143 pages. Paperback. \$19.99.**

Bernard Bull's *Faithful and Flourishing* is the product of a pious Lutheran educator who has spent decades in the trenches. Bull's thesis is clear: faithful and flourishing Christian schools will be focused on their mission, intentional in execution, and focused on excellence.

Bull's writing is sincere and refreshing. In an age where many Christian institutions are caught in a stale cycle of self-preservation, Bull encourages a vibrant intentionality. He understands the challenges that our schools are up against as we deal with the realities of original sin and a fallen world. Bull's insistence that the Word of God must be central to any faithful and flourishing Christian school is correct, and this holds true for the classroom as well as the chapel.

Bull assumes Christian schools can take on many different models, so long as they pursue their mission faithfully in harmony with God's Word. While this is true, more pointed insight and wisdom for the Lutheran parochial school in particular could have been helpful.

This book was not written specifically for the common parish pastor, and as such it would be of secondary interest to him. That said, a mindful pastor can draw many parallels between the Christian school and the local congregation, insofar as they are both Christian institutions which must brave challenging times. We would

do well to remain mindful of our own mission and pursue it with excellence to the glory of God.

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***Atonement in Confessional Lutheran Theology: Franz Pieper.* Foreword by Jack D. Kilcrease. Translated by Susanne Russell, John Theodore Mueller & T.R. Halverson. Sidney, MT: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc., 2024. 189 pages. Paperback. \$9.99.**

This work is a compilation of three works of the Lutheran systematician Francis Pieper (1852–1931) on the atonement of Christ: 1) Pieper’s lecture notes on the pertinent section of Johann Wilhelm Baier’s (1647–1695) *Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, which Pieper himself had edited and published in 1879; 2) an address to the district convention of the Southern Illinois District of the LCMS in 1916; and 3) the section on the high priestly office of Christ from Pieper’s *Christliche Dogmatik* of 1917. These three pieces are bookended on the one hand by a Foreword written by Jack D. Kilcrease, and two biographical sketches of Pieper by Theodore Graebner (1876–1950) and W.H.T. Dau (1864–1944), and on the other hand by bibliographies of mostly modern works on the atonement by others, as well as the works of Francis Pieper in general.

T.R. Halverson, the publisher, is to be commended for providing this helpful introduction to the life and work of Franz Pieper. Of note especially are Pieper’s lectures on Baier here made available for the first time in English. Interesting as well is the new translation of the section from Pieper’s *Christliche Dogmatik*—long available in English translation in the *Christian Dogmatics* (1950–53). Fresh translations never seem to disappoint, often bringing to the reader aspects of the original text missed by older translations.

While the biographical information is a reminder of Pieper’s stellar achievements and career (pastor, professor, seminary and synodical president, father of 13), it unwittingly, perhaps, historicizes him, allowing the reader to dismiss the theological content of the three writings included as an archaic approach to the topic at hand. A contextualization of Pieper’s work in view of current discussions and debates on the atonement— and not just a bibliography of the same—would have been

helpful. Still, an extremely useful volume, providing important resources in a convenient and inexpensive format.

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***Lamentations*. By R. Reed Lessing. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2024. 533 pages. Hardcover. \$69.99.**

For Christians suffering inexpressible anguish over problems or disasters in life which seem insurmountable and perplexing, the opening word of this inspired book (which also serves as the book's title in Hebrew) vividly expresses their desperate cry: **הַיְכָה**, 'eykah, "how could it be?" As Dr. Lessing puts it in his introductory remarks, "Life can be hell. Sometimes it crushes our hearts . . . The cries of anguish in Lamentations help us avoid a one-sided, happiness-only mindset that fails to deal forthrightly with life's tragedies" (1).

This is now Dr. Lessing's sixth contribution to the Concordia Commentary series and, as with the other commentaries he has written, Dr. Lessing's current contribution to the series is scholarly but at the same time very pastoral and practical.

Following his introductory remarks Dr. Lessing provides a thorough summary of the "History of Recent Interpretation," pointing out that his commentary "interprets Lamentations by means of the *regula fidei*. That is to say, the three ecumenical Creeds . . . provide the theological framework for the book's interpretation" (22). His christological emphasis and careful application of law and gospel throughout the commentary is particularly appreciated.

Lessing follows the set pattern for each volume in the commentary series. He first provides a thorough and scholarly exegesis of each verse in each chapter followed by a commentary on the chapter. Readers who are proficient in Hebrew will appreciate Dr. Lessing's thorough and insightful exegetical studies. His comments on Jeremiah's theological use of acrostic poetry and his giving the reader to a richer understanding of **חַסֵּד** (grace) and **לֵב** (heart) are particularly helpful. Pastors (and laypeople) will also appreciate his pastoral applications of the texts to the confusing and discouraging experiences many Christians face in life. Lessing writes, "Lamentations encourages pastors to point the brokenhearted to Yahweh, who invites people to bring conflicting thoughts and emotions before his throne, to address their words of hopelessness to him." He adds, "The prayers in Lamentations inspire us to be honest with God about how we feel when faced with life's injustices . . . Instead of trying to fix people, Lamentations wants pastors to pay attention with great empathy; to sit with the suffering; and, like Jeremiah, to leave the healing to the

Suffering Servant, Jesus our Lord” (34). Lessing includes several helpful excursuses which deal more thoroughly with issues that the book raises such as “Lamentations and Emotions,” “Lamentations and Divine Wrath,” “Lamentations and Surviving Trauma.”

This commentary should prove to be a most comforting and encouraging volume to Christians who must wrestle with the exigencies and tribulations of living in a fallen world and to pastors who are called to minister to these desperate needs that God’s people experience in life.

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***The Joy of Eternal Life.* By Philipp Nicolai. Translated by Matthew Carver. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2021. 286 pages. Paperback. \$43.99.**

In the face of the plague’s extreme suffering, Philipp Nicolai provides a beacon of hope in this small and quick resource for clergy and laity alike. *The Joy of Eternal Life* was written by the great Lutheran hymn writer for the church militant in the midst of the battle. Our synod’s experience with Nicolai has been limited to his well-known hymns. *Wachet Auf* (LSB 516) and *Wie Schön Leuchtet* (LSB 395) put to song the great salvific Word that calls us to eternal life. In *The Joy of Eternal Life*, we are provided an additional experience of Nicolai’s application of that same Word of Life in small and easily-applied readings.

The book, which is well-translated into understandable and beautiful English, is divided into three sections, the third section being an appendix of hymns. The first part, “What Eternal Life Is,” is a thorough introduction of the article of eternal life and its living comfort and joy. The second part, “How God Readies Us for It,” gives a picture of where eternal life comes from and how the Holy Spirit readies us for it.

Each chapter is subdivided into smaller sections. Those sections are headed with their own individual topics and references both to Holy Scripture and to church fathers. The organization is comparable to a devotional or set of meditations. Individual sections within each chapter can be used and applied to personal situations and conversations. The inclusion of references from Holy Scripture makes these subsections easily taken up as family devotion or congregational Bible study.

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- Halvorson, T. R. *Vicarious Satisfaction in Lutheran Catechisms, Confessions, and Hymns*. Sidney, MT: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc., 2023. 152 pages. Paperback. \$6.99. (Burnell F. Eckardt)
- Pfeiffer, Joshua, and Thomas Pietsch, eds. *Shepherding the Flock of God: A Festschrift in Honour of Andrew K. Pfeiffer*. Tarrington, Australia: Kairos Publishing House, 2024. 250 pages. Hardcover (\$28.00), Paperback (\$17.00), and Ebook (\$10.00). (Michael Hauser)
- Whitaker, William. *A Disputation on Holy Scripture*. Edited by Josiah Leinbach. South Bend, IN: Prolego Press, 2024. 883 pages (in two volumes). Hardcover. \$50.00. (Steven R. J. Parks)
- Crisler, Channing. *40 Questions about the Atonement*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2025. 285 pgs. Paperback. \$23.99. (Jack D. Kilcrease)