

Book Reviews

***A Complete Guide to Christian Symbols.* By Edward Riojas. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2024. 352 pages. Hardcover. \$49.99.**

The Bible is replete with striking visual images: the parting of the Red Sea, Jonah and the great fish, five loaves of bread and two fishes. As author Edward Riojas states in the introduction, “When Jesus Christ taught, He often used parables—easily-digestible stories filled with imagery” (7). Illustrator Riojas has helped clergy and laity with this new resource of over six hundred images in black-and-white line drawings to enhance and elucidate biblical texts. Before this volume, *Church Symbolism* by F. R. Webber and Ralph Adams Cram (Cleveland: Jansen, 1938) was a go-to resource for visual references to help artists and craftsmen. This volume provides consistent images in Riojas’ steady drawing style and covers a breadth of subjects from “The Holy Trinity” to “Crosses” to “Saints and Sinners,” to name a few chapters. A chapter dedicated to “Lutherans and Their Times” illustrates content unique to Lutheranism, such as “The Presentation of the Augsburg Confession,” “Paul Gerhardt,” and, bless them, “Lucas Cranach, the Elder” and “Albrecht Dürer.” This resource could benefit beyond the Lutheran church and serve any liturgical Christian community where symbolism related to Holy Scripture holds prominence. A section dedicated to physical articles used in church worship is particularly appreciated, titled “Vestments” and “Sanctuary Fixtures and Paraments.” This volume could be a teaching tool for new confirmands in teaching the names of the vestments and articles used in worship or seen in the church.

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***Jingjiao: The Earliest Christian Church in China.* By Glen L. Thompson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024. 269 pages. Paperback. \$29.99.**

Myths about the church in China abound. Many think Christianity there is a recent phenomenon, influenced mainly by Neo-Evangelicals and Pentecostals, with a tenuous history reaching back to Protestant missions in the nineteenth century. Others might remember the work of Jesuit missionaries to China in the sixteenth century (Francis Xavier, Matteo Ricci). But centuries before, as early as the seventh century AD, the Syriac-speaking Church of the East had sent missionaries to China

and established churches and monasteries with the permission of the Tang emperors. Christians were always a minority religion, and scholars debate the extent to which this branch of the Church of the East became natively Chinese. The church was suppressed by the government in 845 but then flourished under Mongol rule in the steppes of what is now northwest China.

Glen L. Thompson is Professor Emeritus of New Testament and Historical Theology at Asia Lutheran Seminary in Hong Kong, a seminary founded by the mission work of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in 2005. Thompson now lives in Milwaukee and maintains the website fourthcentury.com.

In this book, Thompson gives us many surprises. When Christians were banished from China in 845, “the Church of the East had a presence in virtually all the major settlements throughout what is now Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Xinjiang Province in China, as well as in numerous major cities within China” (164). In the ninth to twelfth centuries, Christianity spread north, all across Mongolia (164). Under Mongol rule, Christians returned to China and flourished through the Mongol Empire. Christians served as officials under the Mongols (172–173). Patriarch (Catholicos) Mar Yaballaha III of the Church of the East (b. ca. 1245) was born and raised in Inner Mongolia (now a northern, autonomous region of China). His friend Rabban Sauma, also a Christian from China, represented Mongol King Arghun on an embassy to Rome and Europe beginning in 1287 (185–186). The Europeans found it odd that a Christian was in the service of the Mongol king, to which Rabban Sauma replied,

My dear fathers, be aware that many of our fathers went to the lands of the Mongols, the Turks and the Chinese to instruct them, so that today there are many Christians among the Mongols. There are even sons of kings and queens who have been baptized and profess Christ’s religion, and there are churches in their encampments. Christians are greatly honoured, and many of the Mongols are believers. Therefore, the king, who is bound by affection to the catholicos and wishes to conquer Palestine and the lands of Syria, requests your assistance regarding the capture of Jerusalem. This is why I was chosen as an envoy: since I am Christian, my word will be believed by you. (185)

With a combination of archeology, church history, and the cultural-political history of the Middle East and China, Thompson gives us a careful, balanced examination of ancient and medieval Christians in China. By so doing he also gives a strong historical argument for biblical Christianity of a sacramental-liturgical tendency within China at the present day. This book deserves to be read by all who care about Christians in China, the ancient history of the church outside of the Greek-

and Latin-speaking world, and the mission of preaching God's word and establishing congregations to the ends of the earth.

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***Serpents in the Classroom: The Poisoning of Modern Education and How the Church Can Cure It.* By Thomas Korcok. Irvine, CA: 1517 Publishing, 2022. 156 pages. Paperback. \$24.95.**

At the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, an exhibition by Missouri Synod schools was given a gold award. The synod's chief theological organ, *Lehre und Wehre*, boasted of the endorsement, thumbing its nose at secular critics and citing the praise of one Dr. R. Tombos: "Here we find the completeness of the exhibit which is so missing in the public schools. . . . I even fear that the accomplishments of the public schools do not always bear comparison with those of the Lutheran congregational schools."¹

In his history for the seventy-fifth anniversary of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, Pastor Heinrich Spengeler relates this triumph before parading the accomplishments of his own school, a gold standard for the synod. He recounts with relish that the school had been accredited in 1912 by the municipal superintendent of schools. At the time, accreditation was seen as a golden ring, a great boon for Missouri's schools. The advantage: graduates of the institution could be admitted to city high schools without an exam. Strings were attached, of course. With accreditation came the city's approved curriculum.² And with that, progressivism, against which the Missouri Synod had held the ramparts so manfully, walked right in the back door. Within the next generation, many Missouri Synod schools had followed suit. This rapid change of affairs deserves our theological reflection.

More than a century overdue, Thomas Korcok's *Serpents in the Classroom* lays bare the theological import deeply embedded in the curricula, theories, and methods our schools have "uncritically incorporated" (xiii). The first and strongest half of the book reads as a potent polemic against modern educational theories, exposing them as not only woefully impoverished but poisonous, even satanic, as the title implies.

¹ Cited in Heinrich Spengeler, *Geschichte der Dreieinigkeits-Gemeinde U.A.K. zu Milwaukee, Wis. vom 1897 bis zum Jahre 1922. Zum fünfundsiebzigsten Jubiläum der Gemeinde* (Milwaukee: Wisconsin North America Press, 1922), 16.

² Spengeler, *Geschichte der Dreieinigkeits-Gemeinde*, 16.

Korcok traces the intellectual origins of humanist educational theories to the Enlightenment's rejection of the authority of divine revelation. Korcok's cogent analysis demonstrates that as heirs of the Enlightenment the most influential pedagogical theorists of the twentieth century—John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Maria Montessori, and others—dogmatically pursued the displacement of orthodox Christian catechesis with utopian ideals of human autonomy fundamentally at odds with the biblical teaching of original sin. As mercurial and faddish as education praxis is, Korcok unmasks current trends and buzzwords for the reheated droppings of yesteryear's secular humanists that they are.

Korcok's work is at its best when it punches hard. In the right hands, it will hit home. Given the stakes, the accomplished and impending apostasy of generations, the text strikes the right tone with its occasional invective, though it sometimes offers assertions in the place of arguments. As such, it likely will not land well with its intended audience, the miseducated educators and miseducating teachers colleges Korcok hopes to win over to the cause of classical education. Instead, this book belongs in the hands of any and every pastor, parent, and school-board member who has begun to smell the rot. It should dissuade them from being satisfied with putting makeup and perfume on a corpse. Would that someone had pressed this book into my hands as a freshman in college!

The weakness of this book lies in its proposed antidote. To be sure, this booklet makes no claim to be an exhaustive positive account of classical education or even much of an outline. Korcok freely admits as much, indicating that “[t]here are many other sources for this” (91). Disappointingly, Korcok fails to mention these sources. As much as Korcok rightly emphasizes that a Christian education is oriented around “a content-driven curriculum” (89) as opposed to “critical thinking,” he does not give the reader much in the way of content. (One notable exception: Korcok presents in an appendix a most helpful *Liederpensum*, or “regimen” for “equip[ing] children to sing [36 Lutheran chorales] by heart around the family table and join in congregational singing during the Sunday morning Divine Service” [97].) Here Korcok would have been better off recommending a couple of books and calling it a day.

Instead, he further muddies already opaque waters, suggesting instead that “there is simply no ‘one size fits all’ model of classical education” (97). With each book published on the subject, the chimera that is classical education grows blurrier. It may or may not involve teaching Latin and a list of old books; no one seems to know for sure.

After claiming that generations of teachers have been hoodwinked and miseducated by progressives, Korcok strangely asserts that teachers “are best equipped to structure the curriculum and select the materials appropriate to the situation” (97). Are these teachers going to become Latinists at the wave of a wand? An ill-defined

classical curriculum and some ruminations on the transcendentals of truth, goodness, and beauty will not cut it. We do not simply need the right ideas; we need the right people and institutions. As Korcok puts it, “[I]n order to have wise and eloquent students” we require “wise and eloquent teachers” (109). Where are these teachers to be had? Korcok clearly understands that solutions have to be far more comprehensive, including the abandonment of accreditation as it currently exists and a complete overhaul of teacher training and recruitment. He waves in this general direction in his conclusion, but he puts more stock in hoping that leopards can change their spots than in clearly delineating a viable alternative.

Although *Serpents in the Classroom* does not deliver on a coherent solution to what ails our schools, it does provide a sobering diagnosis. Additionally, Korcok’s reflections on the objectivity of beauty, natural revelation, and a Christian historiography are enriching, if not always actionable. Despite its shortcomings, this book is a necessary contribution. Parents do not call poison control until they suspect their kids swallowed something dangerous. This book should come in bright red with exclamation marks all around. The kids have swallowed bleach; act now!

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***Church Music: For the Care of Souls.* By Phillip Magness. Lexham Ministry Guides. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2023. 280 pages. Hardcover (\$19.99) and e-book (\$13.99).**

Whenever any new book is published, it can be beneficial to question why another volume on the given topic is needed. Works abound on church-music history and performance practice. However, very few books in this discipline focus on congregational singing. In the past two generations, there have been countless books, articles, blog posts, conferences, and far too many tense congregational meetings regarding churches’ worship *style* and *which songs* a congregation should or should not be singing. However, far fewer words and thoughts have been invested into considering whether a congregation is singing at all. Phillip Magness’ *Church Music: For the Care of Souls* helps address this topic.

The author’s purposes are threefold. First, Magness provides encouragement to church musicians and pastors as they consider better ways to perform their vocations. Second, he offers a helpful model of negotiating the minefield of church-music-style discussions. Finally, Magness challenges worship leaders—from across the

spectrum of church-music styles and preferences—to carefully consider how to best serve the singing of their congregations.

True to its subtitle, Magness makes the point that church music is unique because it is a means to an end—namely, it cares for people’s souls. As Magness explains, corporate singing should proclaim the very truths the assembly confesses. In other words, if you want to know what an assembly believes and confesses, listen to what it sings. The debates regarding church music style and choices have been at the forefront of ecclesiastical concerns for generations. Perhaps it is hyperbole to refer to these as worship wars. However, the term does reflect the destructive and painful results that often occur as casualties during and following such debates. The author offers critical commentary for both sides of such discussions. He calls out praise bands for singing *at* people rather than letting the people sing themselves. He criticizes bands and vocal soloists that overuse microphones and amplifiers that drown out the organic voice of the assembly. He challenges blindly adopting pop worship hits that use texts that are vapid at best and heretical at worst. Churches that celebrate more traditional styles of music are also challenged. On the other hand, Magness also appropriately chides organists who play poorly—with incorrect notes, poor tempi, and inappropriate registration—and thus inhibit, rather than encourage, singing.

Although Magness wisely points out that the text of a song must be the primary consideration in music choices, nowhere in the book are there any guidelines or parameters provided in how to evaluate texts. Of course, one book cannot contain everything. However, some suggested resources for text evaluation (such as The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s resource *Text, Music, Context*) would have been a welcome addition in the “For Further Reading” appendix.¹

Church Music: For the Care of Souls is a welcome addition to church-music literature. Primarily, it fills a void regarding the important topic of congregational singing. More importantly, Magness’ ideas will fill a void in the day-to-day practice of church music by focusing worship leaders on the most important music in a congregation—namely, the singing of the congregation itself.

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Kantor

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¹ Commission on Worship [of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod], rev. Paul J. Grime, *Text, Music, Context: A Resource for Reviewing Worship Materials* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2011).

***Deliver Us: God's Rescue Story in Exodus.* By R. Reed Lessing. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2022. 296 pages. Paperback. \$17.99.**

Over the past fifteen years, Reed Lessing has served the church well with numerous books, especially volumes in the Concordia Commentary series, whose primary readership has been pastors and seminarians. Lessing's latest work, *Deliver Us*, is cut from a different cloth, as it is written primarily to present the theology of Exodus to a lay audience. Though you will not find precise analysis of the Hebrew text or the narrative structure of Exodus within its pages, *Deliver Us* still teems with exegetical insight.

Lessing presents the people and events of Exodus as *our story* in the introductory chapter. A quick and cursory reading that sees our own struggles in the biblical text will pique the ears with the alarm of allegorism. Such alarm should not be sounded in this case. Lessing's approach is akin to typology, though he does not delve into an extended discourse regarding typological exegesis. In typological fashion, he properly reads the text as christocentric. And because Exodus is about Christ and his redemptive work, it is also *pro nobis*—for us. As Christ delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage, so also does he deliver us. Indeed, Lessing's contention is that Israel's deliverance nearly 3,500 years ago is our deliverance because we are bound together with them. Such a catholic understanding of Israel/the church is foundational for the book and rightly so.

Deliver Us is packed with illustrations that are drawn from the author's personal experience, along with historical events. The illustrations will prove to be memorable for the lay reader. The regularity of the illustrations prompts the book to sound much like a devotional, though the depth of content far surpasses what is typically found within devotionals. The rich theology and faithful handling of the biblical text in an accessible approach should give pastors confidence in recommending the volume to members as a substantial alternative to devotionals. That is not to say that pastors would not benefit from the book. It is refreshing to read a robust handling of Scripture that delivers the goods even without technical details. The format reminds pastors that sermons and Bible studies can be meaty while also lay friendly. Indeed, pastors who will be preaching on a text from Exodus or leading a Bible study series from Exodus will be well served by Lessing's work, though they should still spend time in a close reading of the Hebrew text, appropriate commentaries, and other resources.

The one matter that I would have appreciated receiving greater attention is the tabernacle. The significance of the tabernacle is seen in the sheer narrative volume given to Yahweh's instructions for the tabernacle and the construction of the tabernacle. The telos/goal of Exodus is seen in the closing scene of the book in which

Yahweh fills the tabernacle. Thus, Yahweh's desire to dwell among his people is of central importance to Exodus (and the rest of Scripture). *Deliver Us* does treat the tabernacle well, but it does not receive the same level of attention as the rest of Exodus.

Lessing has once again delivered a gift for the church. Accessible for the average laity, meaty enough for professional theologians, *Deliver Us* proves to be worth the reader's time and attention.

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The Word from the Beginning: The Person and Work of Jesus in the Gospel of John.
By Bruce G. Schuchard. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022. 160 pages.
Hardcover. \$24.99.

Bruce G. Schuchard retells the Gospel of John as a modern evangelist weaving his insightful comments into the Gospel's narrative warp. Exegetical gems further enrich the Gospel's rich tapestry.

The Word is the central focus and dominant theme of the Gospel of John, according to Schuchard. The prologue, rather than tacked onto the Gospel, is integral to the overall message that John conveys. Here, Schuchard stands apart from the majority of Johannine scholars, for whom the prologue is an early piece of independent teaching. Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus is the Word in his person and work. He is God's Word who speaks God's word. God can be known only through the Word. When Jesus speaks, God speaks. "God speaks when he who is God's Word comes from him whose Word the Word is" (5). Schuchard stresses this point, repeatedly referring to Jesus as the Word Made Flesh. The Word Made Flesh cleanses with his earthly blood and heavenly water, transforms water into wine, speaks of birth "from above" (ἄνωθεν) of heavenly "water, which is the Spirit" (ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος), etc.

Schuchard divides the Gospel into nine chapters: (1) The Prologue (1:1–18), (2) A First Journey to Jerusalem in Anticipation of the Coming of His Hour (1:19–3:36), (3) A Second Journey to Jerusalem in Anticipation of the Coming of His Hour (4:1–5:47), (4) A Third Journey to Jerusalem in Anticipation of the Coming of His Hour (6:1–10:42), (5) A Troubled Thomas and a Dead Man Rises (11:1–57), (6) The Beginning of the Final Week and Arrival of His Hour (12:1–50), (7) The End of the Final Week and the Accomplishment of His Hour (13:1–19:42), (8) A Dead Man

Rises and a Troubled Thomas (20:1–31), (9) The Epilogue (21:1–25). Schuchard briefly retells each narrative in the Gospel. Nicodemus (John 3:1–21), for example, covers only three pages, one of which is footnotes. A great deal is packed into relatively few words, though. Schuchard draws insightful, sometimes surprising connections between different narratives in the Gospel. “*A bath becomes a beverage*. For a final bath and a final beverage, a baptismal flood of the Spirit and a paschal feast of victory, will both come when the Bridegroom (3:29) sheds his blood. As is only right, the best will be saved for last (2:10)” (19).

Schuchard’s style is unique, academic insight dressed in short, almost poetic language, adding a particular rhythm to his cadence. Consider, for example, Schuchard’s concluding remarks on the cleansing of the temple: “He will do what he has come to do that only he can do. On the day of the feast that defines his end, when its end is served and it sees its end, the result will be what was its end, a feast that knows no end” (21). Schuchard uses this linguistic style throughout his narration. The customary academic style is left to the copious notes, themselves a treasure trove. Skimming the book quickly is a challenge. Walk, do not run. You will get dizzy.

Though short, this book is deep. Elephants and babes, scholars and students will benefit greatly from Schuchard’s retelling the Gospel of John. Read the book slowly, though, thoughtfully, and in short measures. Savor the experience.

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***The English District Saga: A Niche in the History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America*, 2nd ed. By David P. Stechholz. N.p.: Angels’ Portion, 2021. 395 pages. Hardcover (\$29.99) and paperback (\$19.99).**

When acculturation has become a byword in how a church looks to the future, it can be overlooked that pastors in the then-German-speaking Missouri Synod (then Die Deutsche Evangelisch-Lutherische Synode von Missouri, Ohio und andern Staaten) gave attention to preaching the gospel and establishing confessional congregations among the overwhelmingly English-speaking population in the United States. What was established as the English Evangelical Lutheran Conference of Missouri and Other States in 1872 would become the English District, a non-geographical district of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). Retired president-bishop David P. Stechholz provides a fascinating and fully documented

account of a district that has taken the lead in ushering the LCMS into becoming an American church without compromising its confessional stance. Readers will want to give attention to the role that English District leadership and pastors had in the February 1974 faculty walkout of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Stechholz's account will provide researchers with a wealth of materials for years to come.

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Books Received

- Burge, Gary M. *Galatians and Ephesians through Old Testament Eyes: A Background and Application Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2025. 320 pages. Paperback. \$28.99.
- Crisler, Channing L. *40 Questions about the Atonement*. 40 Questions Series. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2025. 288 pages. Paperback. \$23.99.
- Eckert, James A. *How We Got Here: How Science and Faith Shape Our Understanding of the Origin of Life and Its Subsequent History*. Self-published, Amazon Digital Services, 2014. 90 pages. E-book. \$8.75.
- Esget, Christopher S. *(Dis)ordered: Lies about Human Nature and the Truth That Sets Us Free*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2023. 208 pages. Paperback. \$17.99.
- Garrett, Duane A. *Understanding Jeremiah: Its Setting, Composition, and Message*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2025. Paperback. \$24.99.
- German, Brian T. *Haggai and Malachi*. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2024. 621 pages. Hardcover. \$69.99.
- Hardt, Tom G. A. *The Venerable and Adorable Eucharist: A Study of the Lutheran Doctrine of the Lord's Supper in the 1500s*. Translated by Mark DeGarmeaux. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2023. 448 pages. Hardcover. \$49.99.
- Hardy, Jamison J. *Pastoral Leadership: Shepherding and Caring for God's People*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2023. 192 pages. Paperback. \$19.99.
- Hays, J. Daniel. *The Ichthus Christogram and Other Early Christian Symbols*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2025. 272 pages. Paperback. \$27.99.
- Jamieson, R. B., and Tyler R. Wittman. *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022. 320 pages. Paperback. \$32.99.
- Kirkpatrick, Daniel. *40 Questions about Divine Election*. 40 Questions Series. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2025. 288 pages. \$24.99.
- Köstenberger, Andreas J. *Introducing Jesus: The Fourfold Gospel*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2025. 248 pages. Paperback. \$19.99.
- Luther, Martin. *Enchiridion: The Small Catechism*. Translated and edited by Smalkald Press. N.p.: Smalkald Press, 2024. 33 pages. Paperback. \$5.99.

- Maxfield, John A. *Becoming Lutheran: The Community of Brunswick from Evangelical Reform to Lutheran Culture*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2024. 416 pages. Paperback. \$54.99.
- Nicolai, Philipp. *The Joy of Eternal Life*. Translated by Matthew Carver. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2021. 302 pages. Paperback. \$43.99.
- Pieper, Franz. *Atonement in Confessional Lutheran Theology: Franz Pieper*. Translated by Susanne Russell, John Theodore Mueller, and T. R. Halvorson. Sidney, MT: Synoptic Text Information Services, 2024. 268 pages. Paperback. \$9.99.
- Riojas, Edward. *A Complete Guide to Christian Symbols*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2024. 352 pages. Hardcover. \$49.99.
- Schurb, Ken, ed. *Rediscovering the Issues Surrounding the 1974 Concordia Seminary Walkout*. Concordia Historical Institute Monograph Series. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2023. 304 pages. Paperback. \$19.99.