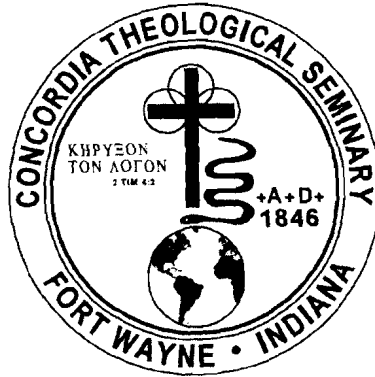


# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



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## *Table of Contents*

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<b>The Challenge of History: Luther's Two Kingdoms Theology as a Test Case</b>	
Cameron A. MacKenzie .....	3
<b>From Divine Sovereignty to Divine Conversation: Karl Barth and Robert Jenson on God's Being and Analogy</b>	
Piotr J. Malysz.....	29
<b>The Rich Monotheism of Isaiah as Christological Resource</b>	
Dean O. Wenhe .....	57
<b>The Gospel in Philemon</b>	
John G. Nordling.....	71
<b>Theological Observer .....</b>	<b>85</b>
Sam Harris and the New Atheism	
Kurt Marquart: Saluting a Fellow Saint	
<b>Book Reviews.....</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Books Received.....</b>	<b>93</b>

## Book Reviews

***The Apostles' Creed for Today.* By Justo L. Gonzalez. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007. 100 pages. Paperback. \$14.95.**

Justo L. Gonzalez is well known for his historical and theological acumen. His three volume *A History of Christian Thought* has long served as a standard for courses in church history. The latest offering from Justo Gonzalez, however, reveals something new—his pastoral concern. *The Apostles' Creed for Today* is the fourth book in the *For Today* series. This series seeks to be a kind of catechism that engages people with little or no theological background in the study of certain fundamental Christian texts. Gonzalez fulfills this catechetical purpose by carefully explaining phrase by phrase the meaning of the Apostles' Creed in its historical context and expounding its significance for today's church.

For Gonzalez, the Apostles' Creed is not merely an historical text but a living confession. Rather than an ancient artifact testifying to a lost history, Gonzalez sees the creed as the heart of the church's life, binding together ancient and modern Christians into one ecclesial reality. Gonzalez's historical prowess fills the outlines of the creed with living color. Each phrase of the creed reveals the struggles and convictions of early Christians. For Gonzalez, it seems that the creed cannot be understood unless it is read as an expression of the church's birth. Her very identity is summed up in these apostolic phrases.

The greatest strength of Gonzalez's book is that he allows the creed to speak a living gospel that creates the very faith it demands and that constitutes the very church from which it proceeds. However, while the creed's connection to the church is emphasized, its connection to Scripture is less evident in Gonzalez's work. For the early Christians, the creed not only expressed the church's beliefs but also recapitulated the whole narrative of Scripture. God's relationship to man from creation to the resurrection of the body shaped the identity of the church. To be baptized into this creedal faith was not only an entrance into the social community of the church but also incorporation into the saving narrative of the Bible.

In spite of this modest critique, Gonzalez's book is a treasure chest full of historical and theological gems. His short exposition of the creed is thin—only one hundred pages—but it is thick with insight. It would be an excellent resource for pastors and teachers charged with catechizing laity in the meaning and significance of the creed.

James G. Bushur

***Why I am a Lutheran: Jesus at the Center.* By Daniel Preus. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004. 224 pages. Hardcover. \$14.99**

*Why I am a Lutheran* sets forth the Christian faith from a Lutheran perspective for the lay reader, and it explains the theological differences between Lutherans and other Christians. For the true Christian faith, Christ and his saving work must be "at the center." Jesus was born, lived, suffered, crucified, died, and rose again so "that we might stand before God as righteous, acquitted of all sin and guilt" (26). Daniel Preus, Executive Director of the Luther Academy, describes Christ's saving work through three biblical mountains. First, on Mount Sinai God gave his law and demanded that it be kept perfectly; it thus reveals that all people are lost and sinful. Second, God's love for sinners is seen on Mount Calvary where Jesus perfectly fulfilled God's law and paid the penalty for every sin: "Through faith in Christ . . . Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness, and all that he has becomes ours" (47). Third, on Mount Zion (the Christian church) the Holy Spirit works through the means of grace to bring lost sinners to faith in Christ. *Why I am a Lutheran* also shows how incorrect views of sin, faith, conversion, and justification give the impression that sinners can earn their salvation.

Christ's justifying work creates a vibrant, dynamic, and living faith that bears fruit in both word and deed. With Christ at the center, Christians who remain both saint and sinner live in godly contrition and repentance. Forgiven by God's grace, Christians are strengthened for sanctified living in their callings and vocations. Christians also experience struggles and trials in this life but receive comfort from the theology of the cross. Hurting Christians look to Jesus—the one who bore the pain, sorrow, grief, and hurt of all humanity—as the center of their faith. In Holy Baptism, God delivers the lost from spiritual death by giving them faith and forgiveness. Why, then, do all Christians know the date of their physical birth while few know the date of their spiritual birth in Baptism? Having officiated at the funerals of children, I identified with Preus's description of how Christ's baptismal promise can comfort grieving parents, relatives, friends, and pastors (108–119).

Incorrect views of Baptism and the Lord's Supper put sinful human beings—their work, worship, thanksgiving, and prayers—at the center. The correct view is that Jesus Christ is at work in the Lord's Supper to give penitent sinners his true body and blood, the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. The scriptural doctrine of the Lord's Supper is tied to proper teaching about the Trinity, the incarnation, substitutionary atonement, the ascension, justification, and close(d) communion. The faith into which one is baptized is the same faith that is to be preached from the pulpit and confessed at the altar. The essential unity of font, pulpit, and altar is found in the justifying grace of Christ, who is at their center. Jesus Christ, the one who forgives sinners and enables them to live by faith, gives them abundant life

here on earth and the fullness of eternal life in heaven. Christ's resurrection victory is the resurrection victory of all who live and die with faith in him.

For the church to dispense these eternal blessings, Christ instituted the office of the holy ministry. For a proper view of the ministry, Christ must be at the center—the center of the preaching, the teaching, and the serving of all God's people. The office of the holy ministry exists to bring sinners to Mount Zion, to the gospel, and to Christ's grace and forgiveness. God's church is at its best when his royal priests and those in the office of the holy ministry serve together in Christ, who is the center of their respective callings and vocations.

Preus's exposition of the centrality of Christ in the church's liturgy explains why liturgical Christians worship as they do. The liturgy is centered in Christ, that is, in his saving and redeeming grace in word and sacrament, to which the congregation responds with singing, praying, and service to the world. All Christians—whether liturgical or not—will benefit from Preus's christocentric explanation of worship. In the church, Christ is to be at the center of worship, whether it is traditional or contemporary. Preus's words remind the church that both liturgical and contemporary worship can move Christ away from the center. Melancthon wrote against the worship of the papists, whose liturgical services centered in human works, action, and eucharistic prayers (the mass), rather than in Christ's justifying work (see CA XXIV, 10–33; Ap XXIV, 46–47, 97–99; Tr 38–40, 51, 57, 72–79; SA II, 2). Removing Christ from the center of worship also happens when contemporary worship services focus on human works rather than on Christ's saving work.

Finally, Preus emphasizes the fact that Christ's church is a missionary church which brings the gifts of faith and salvation to lost sinners. Everyone in the church was once outside and without those gifts: "Christians want the world to know of this Christ who is at the center of Scriptures, of creation, of all life. . . . Christian missionary zeal is based on Christ and what He gives to the world. That hope for the whole world is why Christians and Christian churches will always be about missions" (198). As one who serves in Kazakhstan, these words were particularly striking for me.

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*The Reformation of the Keys: Confession, Conscience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Germany.* By Ronald K. Rittgers. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004. 332 pages. \$52.50.

Historians agree that changes in the medieval understanding of penance and auricular confession had a prominent role in Luther's discovery of the gospel

and the early development of evangelical dogma. Ronald Rittgers, who holds the Erich Markel Chair for Reformation Studies at Valparaiso University, examines the interplay between the theology of the keys and the socio-political history of Germany as the Reformation established itself. He probes the reasons for the reformers' retention of private confession, how they modified and implemented it in the face of obstacles, the reasons for its early derision and later acceptance, and the changing locus of religious authority in Germany. Though it is a detailed historical investigation, Lutheran pastors will find it a great benefit for understanding their own practice of private confession and absolution and for addressing the challenge of (re)establishing it today.

As with much recent Reformation scholarship, Rittgers acknowledges the secularization of religious authority, but he demonstrates how the changing authority of the keys and practice of private confession played into this, a facet often overlooked by other scholars. Rather than a simple realigning of control and discipline, both clerics and magistrates sought to protect spiritual freedom under the gospel and mature religious practices. Rittgers narrows his study especially to the events of Nürnberg, an imperial city, where much of the historic record has been preserved. Those concerned for the spiritual care of Lutheran congregations will be intrigued to see how common attitudes and understandings in this city were remarkably similar to many contexts today.

The study begins by providing an overview of confession and absolution as practiced and understood in the century leading up to the Reformation. The medieval schools did not offer assurance of full forgiveness apart from one's works; they taught a misplaced trust in how one obtained absolution. Nürnberg was primed for the Reformation. In addition, the relatively independent Nürnberg city council, though still subservient to the church, was seeking to exercise discipline over its citizens through this increasingly lax period. Luther's early writings were welcomed heartily there. While his writings encouraged private confession and absolution, their emphasis on forgiveness by faith in Christ triggered rejection of Roman practice in Nürnberg. Though evangelical doctrine led to revised orders and practices, the laity took the stripping of clerical authority and the shift to individual faith as permission not to go to private confession.

As private confession diminished in Nürnberg, outward discipline began to wane—a problem for its civil rulers. Fearing antinomianism, the city council and clergy sought unsuccessfully for means to remedy the problem, such as implementing more explicit forms of general confession within the mass and requiring pastoral interviews prior to Holy Communion. While these measures were included in the Nürnberg church orders (1528; rev. 1533), any obligation for private confession and absolution was intentionally omitted. Nürnberg's influential position and church orders made it a model for others to follow.

In the 1520s, Andreas Osiander—a central figure in Rittgers' investigation—protested the final authority of the ban being taken from the clerics and given to the city council. The council, citizens, and theologians had gradually worked in this direction, mainly to ensure that the clergy were servants and not lords. When general confession and absolution was implemented, Osiander vehemently opposed it. He repeatedly argued, debated, and even preached against general confession and only permitted it because Wittenberg did. Along with Brenz and Dietrich, Osiander viewed private confession and absolution as a sacrament; unlike other evangelicals, he believed that the keys were efficacious even apart from faith such that they could be used to one's judgment. Though absent in Rittgers' treatment, one might see in these debates the roots of Osiander's later controversies on the doctrine of righteousness.

Discerning Osiander's errors was difficult for other evangelicals because they also desired the renewal of private confession. Nürnberg's absolution controversy quietly endured through the 1540s and, ironically, only became settled as the city bowed to the pressure of the Augsburg and Leipzig Interims. These factors, coupled with Osiander's departure, opened the way for instituting an evangelical practice of private confession and absolution. However, the generation that had experienced the early Reformation was already hardened against the practice. As a result, throughout the 1530s and 1540s many pastors diligently taught and encouraged their catechumens and parishes to private confession. It was a golden age for catechesis. The blessings of private confession were also taught through sermons, hymns, plays, and woodcuts. Its establishment proved critical for inculcating a confessional and evangelical identity among laypeople.

*The Reformation of the Keys* examines the historical, social, political, personal, and theological factors that shaped the practice of confession and absolution in this critical era. The tensions and dilemmas of laymen, magistrates, and theologians are well described. It is a welcome relief from popular Reformation scholarship, which has largely neglected spiritual/theological factors in favor of the sociological. Rittgers shows an awareness that many of the confession and absolution questions raised in Reformation Germany are still open for discussion among Lutherans. What is the proper place, form, and role of confession and absolution in Christian piety? How should it be practiced today? As today's Lutherans read this history, they will surely ask such questions and then hopefully seek and receive for themselves this great gift of full and free absolution.

Craig Meissner

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