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Table of Contents

The YHWH Christology of the Gospel of John Charles A. Gieschen	3
Speak as the Oracles of God: Reinhold Pieper's Classical Lutheran Homiletic Adam C. Koontz	23
On the Sufficiency and Clarity of Scripture Korey D. Maas	37
At Home in the Body: Lutheran Identity Peter J. Scaer	61
Theological Observer	73
COVID-19: Tricky Waters for the Good Ship	
Research Notes	75
<i>Res and Signum</i> : But Does It Work?	
Luther Research Tools within the Weimar Edition	
A Homily: On the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ—Attributed to Pseudo-Chrysostom	
Book Reviews	89

Book Reviews

Additional book reviews are available online
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Senkbeil, Harold L. *Christ and Calamity: Grace and Gratitude in the Darkest Valley*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020. Digital (Logos Edition) \$5.99; Paperback \$8.99.

Harold L. Senkbeil, author most recently of *Christ and Calamity: Grace and Gratitude in the Darkest Valley*, is a pastors' pastor. At CTQ's invitation, I am happy to provide this brief review of this timely book, calling your pastoral attention to the manner in which this pastors' pastor encourages and equips us to provide pastoral care in times of calamity, that is, during times of unusual and widespread upset and suffering.

I shall also raise two questions about this timely little book. I have one question regarding our pastoral disposition toward the Chinese Virus or Covid-19 calamity, which I will pose but not dwell on. I have a second question regarding a noteworthy editorial deficiency in this must-read book, which I will elaborate for a paragraph or two. I am working from the PDF version of Senkbeil's book, the free version of *Christ and Calamity* widely available early in the summer of 2020.

This book exhibits an experienced writer's mind at work in concert with a profoundly pastoral heart. You can see this for yourself by perusing the warmly personal opening section, which is actually the author's entire book in a nutshell. In fact, the opening pages are a warm, personal summary of the pastors' pastor that many, many of us know Hal Senkbeil to be from his lifetime of service in our LCMS ministerium, also at both of our seminaries, and at the helm of DOXOLOGY: The Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care and Counsel; thanks be to God!

A pastors' pastor is speaking to pastors and readers everywhere. Here is his professor-author's Lutheran mind at work: "But here's the thing about faith. What matters isn't the amount of faith we have; it's the object of our faith" (9). Here is his pastor's heart, open for all to see:

I've seen a lot of suffering in my time. I've been at the bedside of parishioners in agony; I've wrapped my arms around believers collapsing in anguish. I've kept vigil at deathbeds. Once I carried the coffin of a full-term stillborn baby to its tiny grave, grief-stricken parents and clueless young siblings trailing behind me. I've already told you of the chronic physical pain endured daily by both my precious bride and my dearest friend. (18)

While sampling the opening of *Christ and Calamity*, be sure to note that “this is not a book about the coronavirus or the COVID-19 pandemic [but] about you and God—and how you relate to him in times of calamity” (7). This is what our pastor-author delivers in “the eleven, short chapters of this book . . . How you can trust [the LORD God] even when it seems like he’s untrustworthy” (7).

Finally, two questions for further thought and discussion as you read and share this pastoral gem. First, even though *Christ and Calamity* is “not a book about the coronavirus or the COVID-19 pandemic,” it obliges us to ask nonetheless, “Where can we find care and counsel for the pastoral care calamity generated by the government mandates and social pressures that have led to suffering souls being deprived of their pastor’s presence and means of grace ministry to them in nursing homes, hospices and hospitals? I have no disagreement at all with Senkbeil’s choice to address people suffering in the midst of various personal or family calamities, and the pastors who minister to them. But, strictly speaking, the title term *calamity* evokes wholesale upset and suffering at a national or worldwide level. It’s also at the level of wholesale calamity that pastors and congregations need Christ and his word. No pastor worth his salt is going to accept a temporary situation, much less a “new normal” in which senior saints, disabled children of God, and others facing death and suffering are isolated from word and sacrament in their hour of greatest need, preparing for life eternal. But, how to navigate this, as dual citizens? As I say, *Christ and Calamity*, in the very wording of its title, evokes an additional and urgently-needed pastoral care discussion, above and beyond what this book addresses.

Second, while *Christ and Calamity* is indeed rich in verbatim Scripture passages, the very means of ministry (think of the *nisi per Verbum* of our Lutheran *Apology*, Article 4), it is impoverished in regard to the links, the references, the names of authors who can tutor the caring pastor in the how and why of implementing the kind of authentic pastoral care that the author outlines and exemplifies so well. Although it includes a (very) few footnotes, we have to ask, *Where are the footnotes and references to enable readers to learn what the author means by his brief references to evil, to suffering, and to the psalms of lament?*

For example, in his opening pages, Senkbeil counsels us, “Instead of whining, try lamenting. Have you noticed that in the Bible’s hymnbook, the Psalms, roughly a third are songs of lament” (12), and then quotes opening verses and excerpts from a few of the psalms of lament. For another example, in his brief chapter “When You Are Weak, Christ Is Your Strength,” he alludes to Jeremiah and his book of Lamentations (written during a wholesale, national calamity in the sixth century BC) and provides a few brief excerpts.

In its broader, real-life context, the tutoring and footnotes for the lamenting and suffering mentioned in *Christ and Calamity* began in 2008 and continue today

in the curricula and seminars of DOXOLOGY: The Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care and Counsel. Sessions on suffering and lengthy lessons on using the psalms and other biblical chapters of lament for pastoral care have featured in the training and mentoring of about 15 percent of our church body's pastors thus far, in addition to pastors and church leaders from other denominations around the world. Nevertheless, whether in PDF or in any other format or medium, books on this central pastoral care issue of suffering and lamenting can and must start to make up for what I have called "the lamentable lacuna" that Ronald Rittgers has diagnosed authoritatively in *The Reformation of Suffering*.¹

Parish pastors on the front lines of pastoral care—not to mention our deaconesses, laboring for Christ and us in the homes, hospitals, and hospices of our world with those who are suffering and dying—deserve to have more available to them than a small handful of seminary professors talking about Oswald Bayer's case for a theology of lament. Consider, for example, John T. Pless, et al., *Promising Faith for a Ruptured Age: An English-Speaking Appreciation of Oswald Bayer*.² Pastors, deaconesses, and all Christian caregivers should be provided with the footnotes and links to genuine theology-of-the-cross authors and highly regarded online authorities such as Emily Cook, author of *Weak and Loved: A Mother-Daughter Love Story*.³

Christ and Calamity is another gem for Christ's church and her pastors and caregivers from Harold Senkbeil, a true pastors' pastor. I have my free PDF version, but I'm planning to wait until Lexham Press provides us with the footnoted, fuller edition, presenting Senkbeil's pastoral wisdom *along with the leads, the links, the names—the ways to implement in the field what Hal urges so winsomely in his book*—before buying my own copy, and then buying a few extra copies to give to my pastor and deaconess friends.

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¹ Please see my essay, "Our Lamentable Lacuna: How Western Churches Have Undermined the Plausibility of Christian Faith," in *LOGIA: A Journal of Lutheran Theology*, XXVIII, no. 1 (Epiphany 2019): 7–14.

² John T. Pless, et al., eds., *Promising Faith for a Ruptured Age: An English-Speaking Appreciation of Oswald Bayer* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2019).

³ Emily Cook, *Weak and Loved: A Mother-Daughter Love Story* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012).

***Apostolic Agenda: The Epistles of the Holy Apostle Paul to Titus and Philemon.* By Friedrich Balduin. Translated from the Latin by Eric G. Phillips (Titus) and James L. Langebartels (Philemon). Historical Introduction by Benjamin T. G. Mayes. Fort Wayne, IN: Emmanuel Press, 2020. 264 + xxiii pages. Paperback. \$24.00.**

Apostolic Agenda: The Epistles of the Holy Apostle Paul to Titus and Philemon is the first full work of the Lutheran casuist Friedrich Balduin (AD 1575–1627) to be translated into English by two Lutheran pastors at home in the Latin of the early seventeenth century. The Master of Divinity class of 2020 at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, was motivated to commission the translation of this work as their class gift, and they were soon joined by the Alternate Route class of 2019 and deaconess students in various degree tracks (xxii; for all the students involved, see “Patrons of This Translation,” vii). Benjamin Mayes ought to be commended for heading up this project, dealing with all the intricacies of translating and editing involved, working directly with student leaders from beginning to end, and writing the Historical Introduction, which orients modern readers to the life of Friedrich Balduin (ix–xi), his writings (xi–xiv), the exegetical literature of Lutheran Orthodoxy (xiv–xviii), and exegetical methods used (xviii–xxii).

I was most eager to compare Balduin’s treatment of Philemon to my own, prepared some time ago for the Concordia Commentary Series (John G. Nordling, *Philemon* [St. Louis: Concordia, 2004]). Like many conservative commentators still today, Balduin holds that this shortest epistle was really authored by the apostle Paul and that Onesimus was a runaway slave (Latin *fugitivus*) who stole from his master Philemon before fleeing from Colossae to Rome in the mid-first century AD (208–209)—all points challenged by moderns to greater or lesser extent. Mayes is of the opinion that Balduin wrote his commentaries on Titus and Philemon as a result of “academic disputations” (xviii). Thus, he divides each chapter with a simple two-part outline, provides the Greek text with his translation in Latin alongside the Greek, and then adds an “Analysis and Explication” wherein is furnished the context of each verse, parallels to other biblical passages, geography, history (as appropriate), and word definitions—often with reference to classical and patristic literature. Next come “Questions” with their answers, wherein Balduin grapples with apparent contradictions between the text and other passages of Scripture, or the received Evangelical Lutheran doctrine. Finally, there are “Theological Aphorisms,” which are things to be believed and done (*credenda et agenda*) as drawn from the text. Balduin follows this pattern of explication for both Titus (1–207) and Philemon (208–251). Again, the translation reads well, and one’s sense is that all

textual matters are dealt with satisfactorily in the commentaries of these two Pauline letters.

Mayes avers that the literature of Lutheran Orthodoxy has received a bad rap for being rigid, scholastic, and overly given to dogmatic assent (xv). Balduin's masterful writing proves, however, that the common complaints cannot be justified. Whereas many of today's commentaries rely on the exegetical insights of earlier commentaries prone (in many cases) to historical criticism and other harmful influences, Balduin's work more often relies upon the ancient and Lutheran church fathers, classical sources, or, indeed, parallel Scripture passages that arise from the theologian's command of the biblical evidence. (Of course, Balduin also engages hostile interpreters and false doctrine, for such "rebuking" is necessary for the propagation of the true doctrine [2 Tim 3:16].) Still, all Balduin's interpretations are noteworthy for their soundness—that is, for their ongoing pertinence to the church's faith and life, and not for novelty or idiosyncrasy. I predict that Balduin's faithfully sound exegesis will enliven the teaching and preaching of many Lutheran pastors today who use this marvelous translation in the course of their ministries.

John G. Nordling

***The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours.* By Daniel M. Deuschlander. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2008. 283 pages. \$20.99.**

The phrase "theology of the cross" came into prominence through Gerhard Forde's contribution to the 1984 Braaten-Jenson *Christian Dogmatics* with his redefinition that the "atonement occurs when God succeeds in getting through to us who live under wrath and law. God is satisfied, placated, when his move toward us issues in faith" (47). Atonement did not occur with the Son offering himself as a sacrifice to the Father at Golgotha, but it happens in preaching. Not a past event, atonement continues to happen when preaching effects faith. Though unintended, Wisconsin Synod pastor Daniel M. Deuschlander provides an antidote to Forde's definition, though his sights are set on combatting an evangelicalism that wants American Christians "to be healthy, wealthy, and wise" (vi) without suffering and self-denial. There is a correlation between Christ's cross and ours, but his was imposed by God as atonement for sin and is redemptive (22). Ours is self-generated and paradoxical in that the God who promises salvation also allows sorrows and calamities to come into our lives (33–64). Essential to the biblical theology of the cross offered by Deuschlander is that without atonement there is no justification, and absolution becomes meaningless.

In contrast to the now popular theology of Forde and his disciples James Nestingen and Steven Paulson, a theology which is based largely on the early Luther, Deutschland writes a biblical theology in a style accessible to the laity. In line with the Northwestern Publishing House's Impact Series, he writes for believers who are perplexed that the God who promises good things allows one sorrow after another. In an appendix, Deutschland cites Hermann Sasse, who said that up until the Middle Ages the cross was presented as a symbol of glory, as it still is in Orthodoxy (223–226). A seismic change occurred when Anselm developed the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement, a view that came to be adopted by Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed theologians. Deutschland's clear-cut, straightforward presentation of the biblical theology of the cross is a remedy for false views and a reminder of how Christ's death of sins as the true theology of the cross is the heart of the Christian faith.

David P. Scaer

***Nikolaus von Amsdorf: Champion of Martin Luther's Reformation.* By Robert Kolb. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2019. 216 pages. Softcover. \$17.99.**

With the publication of Robert Kolb's *Nikolaus von Amsdorf: Champion of Martin Luther's Reformation*, Concordia Publishing House adds yet another significant biography to its impressive collection on Reformation figures. Amsdorf, who was a member of Dr. Martin Luther's inner circle at Wittenberg, is an important addition, and Kolb, considered the dean of Reformation scholars in North America, is certainly the best person for the task.

Kolb has been working with Amsdorf for more than fifty years. The book, a reworking of his thesis originally published in 1978, is four chapters long, including an introduction that is especially helpful for those who are either unfamiliar with or have forgotten this colleague and friend of Luther's. Amsdorf, who was a nobleman, was born three weeks after Luther and outlived the reformer by almost two decades. He is credited in part with saving Luther's Reformation legacy.

The first chapter tells the story of Amsdorf's life as student, as professor, and later as church superintendent and bishop. Amsdorf, who was already at the University of Wittenberg when Luther arrived, became convinced of Luther's theology and teaching before the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses. He was a gifted pastor who had the ability to make clear to common people the gospel and the new evangelical teaching coming out of Wittenberg. He would eventually be called to establish the Reformation in the important city of Magdeburg.

The other three chapters focus in on the controversies over original sin, freedom of the will, justification, good works, third use of the law, election, and adiaphora, especially as they developed between the Gnesio-Lutheran and Philippist

parties. (These two parties are briefly described in the introduction.) Later, in what are specifically known as the Adiaphoristic, Majoristic, and Synergistic Controversies, Amsdorf presented and defended Luther's teaching in the Formula of Concord. This places him among the orthodox theologians who staunchly sought to preserve Luther's theology and Reformation.

Luther once praised Amsdorf's preaching, describing him as a natural theologian. But it was after Luther's death that he really shined. Kolb concludes that although Amsdorf was not the genius Luther was, he was key in preserving Luther's message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and that he remained constant in that confession.

As a biography of one of the Wittenberg reformers, and because of his defense of the gospel and involvement in the later controversies, this book on Amsdorf's life is both interesting and helpful to pastors, who are often called to be faithful in the midst of controversy. The book is also highly recommended as a closer look at the controversies that resulted in the Formula of Concord. It is further recommended to the interested reader of the Reformation.

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***Reading the Epistle of James.* Edited by Eric F. Mason and Darian R. Lockett. Atlanta, Georgia: SBL Press, 2019. 342 pages. Paperback. \$18.95.**

With the publication of *Reading the Epistle of James*, we have come one step closer to breaking free from Luther's verdict that it was an epistle of straw, *strohern Epistel*, spoken by the reformer about a document he considered canonical yet did not conform to his law-gospel schema. Commentaries on James almost as a rite of passage take note of Luther's view that it is a "strawy epistle." Jason D. Lane in his published doctoral dissertation, *Luther's Epistle of Straw: The Voice of St. James in Reformation Preaching* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), shows how Lutheran preachers soon made amends in their sermons on James 1:16–21 and 22–27. A comprehensive approach is provided in the sixteen essays in *Reading the Epistle of James*, to which the editors provide a helpful introduction to prepare the readers for what is in store for them.

Problematic in coming to terms with James is the lack of anything resembling a consensus on authorship. Like bookends on a shelf, authorship on one side is ascribed to the Lord's brother and on the other end to an anonymous figure several centuries later, and thus any agreed conclusions to its meaning are illusive. Richard Bauckham lays out parallels between Jesus' sayings in Matthew and Luke, but he

does not specify the form in which James came to know them (9–26). In referring to Old Testament figures, Eric F. Mason weaves Old Testament and non-biblical Jewish themes in the author’s exhortations to Christians (27–43). An intriguing chapter is provided by Matt Jackson-McCabe in showing that this most Jewish of New Testament books is fluent in Hellenistic rhetoric (45–71). Benjamin Wold holds to a common view that James is wisdom literature (73–86), and while recognizing this, Luke Cheung and Kevin Yu propose it can also be understood as a diaspora letter (87–98). Duane F. Watson takes to task Adolf Deissmann’s comments that James is non-literary work, a comment which echoes Luther’s assessment that it lacks order (99–115). Remaining chapters take up topics found in James such as God, devils, salvation, and riches and poverty (117–175). Two essays look at James from a sociological aspect (177–207). An essay on the textual criticism of James will be appreciated by those equipped in the mechanics of this discipline (209–229). In the first of the last three essays, John Painter makes a convincing case that the author of the epistle is the brother of the Lord (231–251). Next Darien R. Lockett surveys how James was received in the early church (253–271). In the capstone essay, Stephen J. Chester contrasts Catholic and Lutheran uses of James to advance their understanding of justification and how in the end Luther found a way to conform it to his overriding principle of the law and the gospel (273–289).

As I read through the essays, I came to a composite view that the epistle was written by one familiar with the preaching of Jesus. His profound theology was expressed in the style of Hellenistic rhetoric without compromising his native Jewishness. It was intended as an epistle to despondent Christians displaced from their Jerusalem. Peter H. Davids in “The Good God and the Reigning Lord” recognizes an early trinitarian theology in the epistle now known as binitarian in that the Son shares in the Father’s deity (117–128). A theme in James that needs development is its Christology, which embodies the humiliation Jesus expressed in the Gospels by his self-designation as the Son of Man. In preaching on James, the pastor has to cut through the interpretative barnacles to get to the hull. Scraping has begun by the contributors. We can continue the task by not repeating in any sermon, Bible class, or other lecture on James, as flashy as it is, Luther’s assessment that James is an epistle of straw. James is a work of theological and rhetorical brilliance and pathos for struggling believers facing persecution.

David P. Scaer