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Table of Contents

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Book Reviews

***Luther's Rome, Rome's Luther: How the City Shaped the Reformer*. By Carl P.E. Springer. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021. 292 + xxv pages. Paperback. $27.00.**

Sometime during his late twenties, Martin Luther traveled to Rome as a pilgrim from Germany and, after spending some four weeks there, returned home (1). Specific details as to what year the trip happened, which route he followed there and back, the identity of his traveling companion, just why he went, and exactly what he saw and did in the city have been lost to the mists of time—and to the vagaries of Luther's memory, for the evidence, such as it is, was based on the reformer's own recollections, usually presented decades after the fact. So one of the things Springer has done in this "masterpiece of Renaissance/Reformation scholarship" (dust jacket) is to sift through all those meaty Weimar volumes containing the reformer's critical works, letters, biblical expositions, and table talks (written in Luther's idiomatic German and Latin) with an eye toward gleaning details not only about the initial trip itself, but Luther's complicated relationship toward Rome. Then there is all the secondary scholarship in English, German, French, and Italian devoted to these and related issues (see the bibliography, 259–277). Basically Springer supposes that Luther possessed a classic "love hate" relationship toward the eternal city and all that she represented to him and to the world. He was himself a son of the Roman Church, his "mother," and the pope was his "father"—at least, at first. However, toward the end of his life there was a definite "hardening" as Luther realized that his earlier reforming efforts had come to naught: "His language directed against the Roman papacy became almost entirely condemnatory, and his humor turned more sardonic and bitter" (192). There was not nearly as much evidence of "love" as "hate" in his later writings toward those who set themselves in opposition to his prophetic proclamations.

The book is organized into four coordinated chapters that probe the complex relationship Luther possessed vis-à-vis Rome: (1) "Hail, Holy Rome!" (The Pilgrim); (2) "I Love Cicero" (The Latinist); (3) "The Kingdom Ours Remaineth" (The Citizen); (4) "If There Is a Hell, Rome Is Built on It" (The Catholic). The first chapter is longest, and the part wherein Springer attempts to retrace Luther's original journey and weigh how much of it may have been true (see "Who Knows Whether It's True?," 49–60). Interestingly, support from the SunTrust Chair of Excellence in the Humanities, a post Springer currently holds at the University of Tennessee Chattanooga, made it possible for him in 2018–2019 to spend about six months trying to retrace Luther's steps while on his way to and from Rome, and in the city itself (ix). In the second chapter, Springer exposes Luther's formidable command of

the Latin language and Roman history. In the third chapter, Springer points out Luther's conservative political views, and that he was indeed a loyal citizen of the Holy Roman Empire—which, according to Voltaire, was never in any way "holy, nor Roman, nor an empire" (114). As such, Luther was inordinately respectful toward Charles V, even though the latter plainly did not "get" the Reformation, and even proved to be Luther's implacable foe (126). In the fourth chapter, Springer sets forth Luther's viscerally negative reactions toward the pope, shaped to some extent by the reformer's declining health and even psychological factors (154–155). Despite Luther's "negative speech" against Rome especially toward the end of his life, Springer attempts to demonstrate that the harsh language the reformer employed could be viewed as an acerbic preachment of the law—intended to drive the papists to repentance and forgiveness in the gospel (see "Law and Gospel," 177–191): "The ultimate purpose of the scalpel is not to harm but to heal" (179).

Springer's book demonstrates mastery not only of Latin philology and the ancient world in general, but also Luther's spiritual struggles and finer points of Lutheran doctrine. As such, Springer himself is indubitably the leading voice in that movement known as Lutheranism and the Classics (there have been six conferences to date, hosted at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, in late September/early October on alternating years). Springer has written extensively on Martin Luther before—for example, *Luther's Aesop* (2011) and *Cicero in Heaven: The Roman Rhetor and Luther's Reformation* (2017). Springer's latest book will be of interest to classicists, pastors, and laypersons who want to probe the reformer's complicated relationship toward Rome, and Rome's relationship toward him.

John G. Nordling

***Luke-Acts in Modern Interpretation*. Edited by Stanley E. Porter and Ron C. Fay. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2021. 398 pages. Hardback. $31.99.**

The confessional church's relationship with the academy is increasingly tenuous. Attend the convention of the Society of Biblical Literature, and you will have to look long and hard for sessions that bear the mark of true Christianity. Identity politics is the order of the day, and you are bound to find the text under various sociological lenses, with the result that the Scriptures end up looking like the glasses by which they are read. This has long been the case, but no one can doubt the scholarship of previous generations, in which entrance into the academy demanded mastery of many languages and a wide-ranging knowledge of the cultural and historical context. Many Christian colleges either accept the orthodoxy of the academy as a given, or they avoid such scholars all together.

But there is still much to learn. *Luke-Acts in Modern Interpretation* is a case in point. In a helpful volume of twelve essays, readers are introduced to the work of such scholars as Martin Dibelius, F. F. Bruce, and Hans Conzelmann. It might surprise today's readers to learn that Adolf Harnack was convinced that the book of Acts was written around the year 62 AD. Harnack's argument for Luke himself being a Christian from Antioch is compelling. Zachary K. Dawson's essay "Adolf Harnack and Lukan Scholarship at the Height of Classical Liberalism" offers an open window into the thinking of a man who influenced much of the academy that came after him. Likewise, James D. Dvorak demonstrates how Martin Dibelius highlighted aspects of Luke's Gospel that comport with the ancient genre of biography. Osvaldo Padilla shows how Henry Joel Cadbury helped us to see Luke-Acts as a work in two parts, the Gospel anticipating Christ's work in the church of the Pentecost. Stanley E. Porter gives the reader an appreciation for F. F. Bruce's thoroughgoing defense of Luke as a reliable historian.

A book such as this will be of interest to those who wish to be introduced to the titans of scholarship past, an age in which the texts, even when put under a skeptical microscope, mattered. For those who would like to gather a little bit of the past, this volume is recommended.

Peter J. Scaer

***Provoking Proverbs: Wisdom and the Ten Commandments.* By David Lawrence Coe. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2020. 160 pages. Paperback. $16.99.**

Many have recognized that the Psalms in all their rugged beauty are more relevant than ever. But the wisdom literature seems to lag behind in popularity. The Sermon on the Mount is too often treated as a kind of unattainable ideal, while the Proverbs seem perhaps outdated. But there may be no more valuable book for today's world than Solomon's Proverbs. Wisdom is in short supply. What wisdom literature teaches us is that the world is created in a certain way, and that there is an underlying and accessible reality beneath all things. Consider a world in which marriage has been undefined, and no one can define, with any kind of confidence, the meaning of a man or a woman. But wisdom takes us deeper. Wisdom literature reveals to us a life that has meaning, a life that is lived according to God's purpose and design.

David Lawrence Coe, a professor of theology and philosophy at Concordia University, Nebraska, has done the church a great favor by authoring his accessible and engaging *Provoking Proverbs.* The book's structure is simple and helpful, matching proverbs to each of the Ten Commandments. This volume would work

well for any age group, from youth to seniors. It is especially helpful that Coe offers a template for putting the proverbs to memory, so that the wisdom of God might be planted in our hearts and enrich our lives. Along the way, Coe offers insightful and amusing anecdotes and observation. One of the best parts may be Coe's plan to put to memory ten proverbs, one for each of the commandments.

Perhaps this book fits our age so well because it is so countercultural. The world teaches us that we are our own creators and that there is no such thing as reality, only my truth and your truth. This secular aimlessness has left many without rudders or compasses. In a world where pride is given a month in its honor, we would do well to put certain proverbs to memory, such as "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov 16:18).[1] In a world where money matters, are we tempted toward stinginess? Proverbs 28:27 reminds us, "Whoever gives to the poor will not want, but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse." But entitlement is not an option, and hard work matters, as we read in Proverbs 28:19: "Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty." What should a young man look for in a woman? Proverbs has plenty to say, and Coe leads us to the passages and puts them into an easy-to-follow context. No doubt, these proverbs are bound to hit us and hurt us in different ways. Each of us is prone to a certain kind of foolishness. So, let the proverbs have their way with us. And use this book with your young people, at home, in school, and in church. Use it in college classes along with Aristotle. Compare and contrast. When you feel sheepish to speak about things, let Solomon start the conversation, and let David Lawrence Coe be your guide.

Peter J. Scaer

***Faith Misused: Why Christianity Is Not Just Another Religion*. By Alvin J. Schmidt. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2022. 150 pages. Paperback. $15.99.**

For a faithless generation, the word *faith* has become part of the general vocabulary. Even those who have very little use for God can say "I am praying for you" and "keep the faith" with perhaps no more meaning than being courteous. Retired seminary and college professor Alvin Schmidt has produced a very readable analysis of this misunderstanding and convincingly argues that the word *faith* itself

[1] All Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

is strictly a Christian concept drawn from the Bible. In chapter 4, Schmidt gets practical and lists several misuses of the word: "Faith Is Illogical Belief," "Leap of Faith" (popularized by Kierkegaard), "Faith Requires No Evidence," "Evidential Faith Is Inferior Faith," and "Faith Is Independent of the Five Senses." This was summed up by President Dwight D. Eisenhower: "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is" (90). That says it all. Christians, Muslims, and Jews can all have faith. This book will make for lively discussion in church Bible classes and will open the eyes of high school, college, and seminary students studying religion.

Chapter 2, "Faith Hijacked from Its Biblical, Historical Foundation" (26–49), is for those who want to delve into the history of how faith was denuded of its christological content. It all began with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment up through David Friedrich Strauss, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich. The much admired Dietrich Bonhoeffer held that regarding the resurrection of Jesus as a historical event is "senseless and crude" (46). Note should be made of Martin Kähler who, by separating the Christ of faith from the Christ of history, could find a place for the resurrection in preaching but not in history (37–41). For those who are still asking what the theological fuss is all about, they can find an answer in *Faith Misused*.

David P. Scaer

***Bright Valley of Love: The True Story of a Handicapped Child Who Finds a Haven of Love in the Nightmare of Nazi Germany*. By Edna Hong. Fort Wayne, Indiana: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2021. 159 pages. Paperback. $9.99.**

The book's idyllic title seems undermined by its jarring subtitle. What is it that makes for a wonderful life, a life well lived? What do we prize? Many would list health and happiness, a good home with parents who care, followed then, perhaps by a family of our own. But Edna Hong takes us beyond surface smiles into a deep and abiding joy that can be found in Christ and in the Christian love of those who care. Hong tells us of flowers in the midst of thorns, hope that thrives in the desolation of human frailty against the backdrop of Nazi horrors.

Hong introduces us to Gunther, an epileptic with limbs feeble and deformed. Children may thrive on words of affirmation, but Gunther was told that he was "no good for anything." And that was from his grandma. But to Grandma's credit, she stepped in when Gunther's mom wanted nothing to do with him. She may have been ashamed of her grandchild, but she had just enough maternal instinct to spoon feed the child and ultimately take him to Patmos, a Christian home for disabled children,

and that would make all the difference. It was there, in this little boarding school, that Gunther was first loved, really loved, and heard a deaconesses sing, "O Jesus so meek, O Jesus so kind."

Indeed, the book has a kind of soundtrack, sweet and gentle hymns that played in the background of Patmos, and then in the boarding school to follow. Gunther had not much of a family to speak of, but he was brought into a communion of love, a place where the pastor took special care and treated the children, whom he called birds, as his own. A place where music filled their ears and hymns were placed in their hearts and upon their tongues. There Gunther learned to walk, at least in his own way. And it was there at Patmos that Gunther learned the true meaning of Christmas, how Christ came to patch things up, because, as they learned, "There is a crack in everything."

This book is a splash of joy in what for too many is a joyless world. Emotionally charged, this is no easy read. At first, I read it all at once. This is not a story easily put away. The second reading, if anything, was harder, but in the best of ways. For those susceptible to weeping, tissues should be close at hand. But hardly any eye will be left unmoistened. Every life matters, and there can be great joy in the midst of sadness. And this is made possible by Christian love, and by the kind of songs written by the likes of Paul Gerhardt, the kind of treasures that can be found in *Lutheran Service Book* and any hymnal worth its salt. Life is precious, and music matters. Gunther's life is a testimony to such deep and abiding truth.

Peter J. Scaer