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Published by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.  
Please direct queries to  
[journaloflutheranmission@lcms.org](mailto:journaloflutheranmission@lcms.org).  
This journal may also be found at  
[www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission](http://www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission).  
Find the *Journal of Lutheran Mission* on Facebook.

Editorial office:  
1333 S. Kirkwood Road,  
St. Louis, MO 63122-7294,  
314-996-1202

Member: Associated Church Press Evangelical Press Association (ISSN 2334-1998). Indexed in ATLA Religion Database. A periodical of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s Offices of National and International Mission.



# BOOK REVIEW AND COMMENTARY

***Afraid: Demon Possession and Spiritual Warfare in America***  
by Robert H. Bennett (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016)

by Leonard Astrowski

**D**R. ROBERT H. BENNETT'S SECOND BOOK, *Afraid: Demon Possession and Spiritual Warfare in America*, is his latest installment in a series focusing on phenomenology. In these works, Bennett focuses on demonic oppression, possession, and the manifestation of evil forces.

While Dr. Bennett's first book — *I Am Not Afraid: Demon Possession and Spiritual Warfare: True Accounts from The Lutheran Church of Madagascar* (Concordia Publishing House, 2013) — deals primarily with accounts from places removed from the contemporary American church by both distance and time, his second work sets its gaze on domestic soil. It, perhaps, is easier to dismiss Bennett's first work, rationalizing his arguments away as things that happen over there, or as things that happened then. Regardless of the primary source evidence recorded and analyzed by Bennett, alongside the record of Scripture and esteemed Lutheran sources such as Martin Luther and C.F.W. Walther, the reader may still remain the sceptic.

Turning his analysis to contemporary America in this second installment, *Afraid*, Bennett again produces primary source evidence — often the experiences of the author himself — collected from around the nation. Dr. Bennett takes the reader from the Midwest, through New Orleans, and to the American Southwest. He sets before the reader evidence found in mundane American life. The reader is asked to consider the testimony of witnesses found in otherwise unremarkable everyday life — suburban homes, a rural parsonage, hotels, tourist traps, and television. The desire is to confront the skeptic, especially the Christian student of contemporary Western thought, with the spiritual reality around him. Bennett confronts

the reader with this reality, which is often routinely confessed, but is more routinely ignored, by an individual believer. Bennett brings to center stage the truth that is always present but often dismissed although it exists right next door, if not in the reader's own life experience.

The title of Dr. Bennett's work might lead the bookstore browser to think of this as a sensational piece. After all, who doesn't like a good ghost story? Indeed, Rev. Dr. Bennett is an ordained minister in a confession that prides itself on the scholarship and the ability of her ministers to analyze and communicate deep theological concepts. Dr. Bennett is a member of a church body that takes great pains to rightly point out the fraudulent claims of those

that allege ecstatic experience. It is a church body that crinkles its nose at the slightest whiff of sensationalism. This makes it all the more remarkable that this work is destined to be found on the shelves of Lutheran clergy and laity, as well as the clergy and members of other confessions.

The reason for this leap from bookstore shelf to trained pastor's study is simple. Dr. Bennett presents his work as one of scholarship. Indeed it is. Bennett's research allows the evidence to speak for itself. The reader might be disappointed to discover that absent from this work are accounts of rotating heads and levitating bodies. Bennett simply presents everyday lives influenced by fear. He presents the accounts of people who are afraid. According to Bennett and the evidence he shares with the reader, it is often fear that influences the individual's actions. It is this fear, as Bennett convincingly argues, that opens the individual to spiritual attack.

Remedies offered to people under such attack, notes Bennett, are not found in special incantations, the use of

The book shines as a solid analysis of Scripture and as blossoming from a well-thought-out confession of Christ.

With this work in hand, both clergy and laity will find their fear of speaking of unexplained occurrences abated.

sacred objects, or the visitation of “holy” sites (Bennett notes that these are often the source of trouble), but in Christ alone. No bells, no whistles, no whiz-bang and light shows. Only Christ is offered as remedy. This is what makes this book special. This is what makes this book a source of comfort. This is what keeps the work out of the morass of sensationalism and in the realm of scholarship. The book shines as a solid analysis of Scripture and as blossoming from a well-thought-out confession of Christ. Hollywood is nowhere to be found in this work.

In *Afraid*, Dr. Bennett shares his scholarship with the reader through a number of vignettes. While certain details are changed to protect privacy, these vignettes serve as the source material for Bennett’s analysis and conclusions. Woven throughout these vignettes are glimpses of how the church, particularly the Lutheran church, throughout time has always aided people under the influence of demonic forces — how the church rescues people from fear. Bennett does this by referring the reader, as the church has and should, first and foremost to Christ. Bennett demonstrates, using Scripture, how Christ is the One who has already defeated Satan and his demons. Dr. Bennett also draws from the church’s liturgy and hymnody and how these point the hearer repeatedly to Christ’s victory. Repeatedly, throughout the book, the reader is invited into the life of an individual under demonic oppression or possession. Repeatedly, the reader is shown how these demonic forces are overcome through the word of Christ and his victory spoken through the mouths of simple men. The reader is left to clearly understand that it is not the individual, or even the pastor, who does battle with Satan. The reader is left to understand that the Lord Jesus Christ has already defeated Satan. The person under demonic attack is simply pointed to Christ and instructed to cling to Christ’s victory. This again leaves no room for a television mockumentary. One is struck by the quietness of these events. Simple prayers prayed. Familiar Scriptures read. Christ proclaimed. The result? No thunderous voices and dripping walls. Just simple and yet profound peace — the peace of Christ.

Also, Dr. Bennett avoids the pitfall of trying to solve mysteries that cannot be solved by human beings. Bennett notes that it is often difficult to draw strict lines, or even recognize the lines, between demonic influence and mental illness. Yet Bennett indicates that the various health care vocations — all a gift of God — work alongside the spiritual caregiver to affect healing. These vocations each have a unique God-given role in the well-being of

the individual. Each, according to Bennett, are to be used as necessary. Pastors are not to wash their hands of an individual requiring medical attention. Rather, they are encouraged to expand the circle of care as required while never relinquishing responsibility for spiritual care.

In Bennett’s analysis of the hodgepodge of American spirituality, one will find many reasons that may cause fear. However, while there are many reasons a person might be afraid, Bennett gives reason to *not* be afraid. With this work in hand, both clergy and laity will find their fear of speaking of unexplained occurrences abated. They will find courage to speak and to listen. They will find the Christ who repeatedly instructs us to not be afraid. This is the benefit of this book.

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# BOOK REVIEW AND COMMENTARY

***Build on the Foundation of the Apostles and Prophets: Sola Scriptura in Context*** (Cambridge: Evangelical Lutheran Church of England, 2013)

by Brian Flamme

**B***uilt on the Foundation of the Apostles and Prophets: Sola Scriptura in Context* is a collection of six papers presented at the Westfield House International Symposium in August 2012. The volume spans a readable 174 pages. The six major contributions cover the topics of biblical hermeneutics, the Christological basis of Scripture and its attributes, the status of Lutheran confessions as drawn from Scripture, the word of God according to both Islam and Christianity, the danger of enthusiasm at the time of the reformers and in modern contexts, and finally the danger of biblicism.<sup>1</sup> Of the six papers, the volume includes prepared responses to five of the papers, save for Dr. Bombaro's paper on biblicism. The editor, Dr. Anssi Simojoki, admits "this is unfortunate, since this paper elicited a stronger reaction than anything else at the entire Symposium" (vii). Apparently there was some concern that Dr. Bombaro "was verging dangerously close to Gospel reductionism — a charge he categorically denies" (vii). There are some important questions that should be asked in light of Dr. Bombaro's paper, but more on that later.

<sup>1</sup> The following is a list of the major papers' titles and authors with their respective respondents. I. "Was ist das? The Nature and Basis of Biblical Hermeneutics" by Jeffery Kloha with a response by Boris Gujevic (3–42). II. "The Word Was God: Inerrancy or Christology" by David P. Scaer with a response by Daniel Johansson (45–66). III. "Quia-Quatenus: Scripture and Confession" by Armin Wenz with a response by Joseph Randrianasolo (69–98). IV. "God has spoken through the prophets...and by the Son: Word of God in Islam and Christianity" by Adam Francisco with a response by Martti Vaahtoranta (101–120). V. "Letter or Spirit? Modern Enthusiasms" by Anssi Simojoki with a response by Jonathan Mumme (123–150). VI. "Biblicism and the Imminent Death of American Evangelicalism" by John Bombaro (153–174).

Jesus himself assures us that his church that clings to her confession will endure against hell's gates.

Overall, I found the volume to be a challenging dialogue on the timely topic of what confessional Lutherans can and should say about the use and attributes of the Holy Scriptures. The prepared responses ask perceptive questions of the presenters that give context and clarity to the issues raised by the papers. Some of the most edifying contributions came from international authors from outside the Missouri Synod, like Dr. Randrianasolo's response to Dr. Wenz's paper in which he stresses that the divine authorship of the Scriptures demands a robust *quia* appropriation of our confessions. Also, I was pleased with Dr. Simojoki's keen identification of enthusiasm in contemporary hermeneutical trends that rends the Holy Spirit from the text of Scripture.

Of course, the responses do not cover all the critical questions that could be put to the presenters, though no doubt much of the ensuing discussions at the Symposia must have addressed more than is contained in the book.<sup>2</sup> Two papers brought up, in my mind, important concerns that I will try to articulate.

First to consider is Dr. Kloha's paper on biblical hermeneutics. His major problem is multiple interpretations of Scripture and the meaning of the text (8). It seems that Kloha understands a text's meaning as not intrinsic if the text is read with the right hermeneutical principles, but rather created through an interplay between the text and the conditional circumstances of the reader or hearer. "One's situational concern produces the 'meaning' that the reader draws from the text" (12–13). The result appears to be that the text can have as many meanings as there are readers and contexts. Though Kloha gives the impression

<sup>2</sup> The editor regrets that the extended conversations and the panel discussion must wait for a later edition (vi).

Theologians will find this to be a challenging dialogue on the timely topic of what confessional Lutherans can and should say about the use and attributes of the Holy Scriptures.

that some created meanings can be flat out wrong, he does leave room for a given text to have multiple interpretations that are acceptable. Indeed, he writes that there are “multiple possible faithful ways to hear a text” (13). How do you ensure a faithful reading? The solution is to have a right goal or telos. According to Kloha this is the end of “double love” toward God and the neighbor, which he obtains through looking at Augustine, Falacious, Luther, and the Scriptures (32–35). With the right goal, faithful interpretations presumably result.

First, how do we actually know if we have obtained an appropriate goal? According to Kloha’s model it seems that multiple goals could present themselves through trying to discern the meaning of the text given the varied circumstances of the reader. Is the goal discerned from a tradition of interpretation, say the faithful writings coming from the church? Which church, creeds, or theologians should we heed? Could we feasibly think of better goals, like faith toward God and love toward the neighbor, since this includes the comfort of Jesus’ cross and precludes the possibility of mere legalistic readings of Scripture? Second, if meaning is “created” and not intrinsic to the text, can the Christian have certain comfort for his conscience that he is reconciled to God and forgiven for Christ’s sake? I would hope that the preaching of the gospel has an objectivity that is prior to a person’s attempts at creating meaning, that the meaning grabs ahold of the sinner dead in his trespasses who cannot but twist the promises of the gospel into killing words of law.

My second group of concerns centers on Dr. Bombaro’s scathing critique of biblicism. I was surprised by the caustic tone that was seemingly directed against Lutherans, like myself, who in the simplicity of our faith trust in the inerrancy (PS 119:160; JOHN 17:17), infallibility (JOHN 10:35), efficacy (ROM 10:17; HEB 4:12), sufficiency (2 TIM 3:16–17), and clarity (PS 119:105; 2 PET 1:19) of the Bible.<sup>3</sup> These attributes, to which I contend the Scriptures themselves testify as well as the teachings of our Lutheran fathers, are to Bombaro the marks of biblicism (157ff) that are

Our prayer is to remain faithful in the midst of the condemnations of the world.

killing the possibility of witnessing to our world.<sup>4</sup> I do not have enough room for a point by point challenge of the paper, though in another place that might well be necessary, but I will challenge him on two points. Bombaro is concerned that our adherence to six-day creation as the first two books of Genesis describes and our preaching of sexual ethics makes biblicists a laughing stock in an “enlightened society” (159). He writes, “No one is listening” (172). So what? Jesus said that his saints would be hated by the world (JOHN 15:18). And if the world is not listening, that does not mean that sinners are not hearing the preaching of forgiveness for their salvation, even if we preach the Scriptures’ doctrine to dwindling congrega-

tions. Jesus himself assures us that his church that clings to her confession will endure against hell’s gates (MATT 16:18). Our prayer is to remain faithful in the midst of the condemnations of the world (MATT 10:32–34; LUKE 12:8).

Second, Dr. Bombaro argues that the Lutheran teaching “about the Bible as the ‘sole source’ and ‘sole rule’ is a departure from the Lutheran principle of sola Scriptura,” which is patently false (165). I do not know how else to take it when we “confess our adherence to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments, as to the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which alone is the one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teaching are to be evaluated and judged” (SD [Kolb–Wengert, 527]). We grant other authorities besides the Scriptures as taught by the Fourth Commandment. But when it comes down to it, “We must obey God rather than men” (ACTS 5:29). Scripture stands in judgment of all other authorities, even in matters pertaining to history, ethics, and science. If we lose one jot of Scripture, even a gospel reductionist principle must be called into question. This is not to say that Christ does not indeed stand at the center of the matter of Scripture as its formal principle. This is one of the major emphases of the Symposium that I wholeheartedly agree with. However, when the other doctrines of history, ethics, the angels, or anything else that can be discerned through careful study of the text is attacked, it comes at a price of denigrating the glory of Christ, even if we do not realize it because of the ignorance of our flesh.

<sup>3</sup> “Biblicism’s characteristics as all-authoritative, sufficient, infallible, inerrant, and wholly inspired are a massive and unavoidable obstacle to the ability to proclaim the gospel today not just for American biblicists but for confessional Lutherans” (166).

<sup>4</sup> Given Dr. Bombaro’s description of biblicism’s marks, I am not ready to concede the pejorative for use against the vast majority of pastors and congregations in the Missouri Synod.



Words, spoken and written, are seemingly weak. They can be abused and misunderstood. But just because a person's words can be twisted and misunderstood, that does not mean that what they said or written have been destroyed. How much more so for God's words that he has seen fit to set into human writing and placed on human lips for delivering to us the fruits of his Son's death and resurrection. "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" (1 COR 1:21).

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# BOOK REVIEW AND COMMENTARY

## ***Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross — A Study of Luther's Pastoral Theology***

by John T. Pless (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013)

by Ely Prieto

WITHIN THESE PAGES, Professor John T. Pless shares with his readers one side of Luther that is rarely discussed or even known by many people — Luther's pastoral heart! As we approach the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, many books about Martin Luther have been (and will be) released. These books certainly offer interesting aspects of Luther's life, talk about the Reformation movement, and share Luther's theology and many other facets of the Reformer. However, not many of them will talk about Luther as a pastor and a preacher. Next to his work in the classroom, a great part of Luther's daily life in Wittenberg was taken up with pastoral duties more than anything else.

In his years serving as a pastor, Pless says that Luther was a constant source of inspiration, curiosity, and challenge. The more Pless studied Luther and his theology, the more he saw how his own pastoral practice was influenced by the pastoral Luther. When he accepted the call to the seminary in Fort Wayne to teach practical theology, Pless was determined to use Luther's writings to teach the care of souls. This book condenses fifteen years of teaching experience and reveals how Luther put his evangelical theology to work in actual cases of pastoral care (11, 14).

Right at the introduction of the book, the reader is reminded that for Luther, genuine pastoral care is a theological undertaking. This has nothing to do with finding psychological or sociological solutions for the problems and struggles of life, but instead addressing the human being with God's word, applying law and gospel (14). For Luther, the task of theology is very specific: To deal with man as sinner. "The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and

Savior of man the sinner. Whatever is asked or discussed in theology outside this subject, is error and poison" (15). Pless says that, "for Luther, distinction between Law and Gospel is not a theoretical identification of specific texts as either Law or Gospel; it is instead a functional distinction that is critical for pastoral diagnosis of a person's spiritual condition before God" (15). However, this functional distinction between law and gospel is not something that pastors can attain by themselves. It is only under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit, it is through *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*, that true pastors are made.

*Oratio* is anchored in the reading and hearing of God's word and it is this word that creates faith in Christ Jesus and kindles prayer. True *meditatio* is not an internal thing as if something magical would happen as someone tries to clear up his mind. Meditation is grounded in the *externum verbum*; it draws one outside of himself into the promises of Christ (faith) and into the need of the neighbor (love) (15, 18-19). *Tentatio* is nothing new in the life of a pastor, and Luther was bold to say that the devil is

the best teacher of theology. Temptation is necessary for the Christian life in general, but especially for preachers of the word. According to Luther, *tentatio* turns the student of God's word into a real theologian. It prepares and equips the pastor to serve as an "instructor of consciences" by granting him the capacity to distinguish the law from the gospel (21). Pless concludes by saying that Luther's triad, *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*, shapes the ongoing life of the pastor, as he is forever dependent on the power of God's promises (22).

For Luther, proper pastoral care is grounded in the theology of the cross and not in the theology of glory. Luther also understands that the work of pastoral care

Proper pastoral care is grounded in the theology of the cross and not in the theology of glory.

This book provides a solid pastoral resource for a true evangelical *seelsorge* (care of souls) that directs sinners to the cross of Christ.

is to be directed by the word of the cross delivered in sermon and sacrament so that living faith in Christ might be created and sustained (22, 25). Pless is quick to remind the reader that along with preaching and the Lord's Supper, Luther prizes confession and absolution as a means of pastoral care. The ultimate goal is always to comfort the consciences of terrified believers and strengthen their faith to live under the cross in the lively hope of the resurrection (27-28).

After establishing the foundation for the art of pastoral care, Pless moves on to show how the pastor Luther applies his evangelical theology in real situations of care of souls. In the following chapters, Pless's many years of Luther studies shine through. By quoting the catechisms and *Luther's Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, the reader is exposed to Luther's pastoral heart in a deep and meaningful way.

Chapter one talks about the general visitation of Saxony, which provided a clear x-ray of the spiritual reality of those days. The ordinary people knew absolutely nothing about the Christian faith, and unfortunately many pastors were unqualified to provide religious instruction. On top of that, they were poor preachers. This sad diagnosis prompted Luther to write his catechisms, which provided a basic summary of Christian doctrine, along with a template for teaching the faith. Soon, the catechisms became a reliable guide for both pastors and people in the parish, helping God's people to live under the cross and in hope of the resurrection (39-41).

In chapters two and three, we learn how Luther provided pastoral care for people facing melancholy, depression, doubt, and despair. As someone who also faced depression and doubts in his own life, Luther directed people not to their own thoughts and feelings, but instead he drew them away from self-absorbed reflection and led them to the baby of Bethlehem, the man of Calvary, the true Son of God! God is for us in every way and Satan cannot harm God's children, for they have another Lord. Yes, faith may be weak and wobbly, but Christ is strong and sure (44-45)!

Chapter four brings us to the arena of pastoral care in light of vocation, which is another genius theological contribution from Luther to the church. The Christian is the *larvae dei*, the mask of God, and his or her vocation is to serve. God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does. Christ sacrificed himself for us on the cross; we now give ourselves sacrificially to our neighbor in love

(65). In this chapter, the reader finds helpful insights from Luther in terms of pastoral care for those whose callings place them in dangerous places, where epidemics and health issues become a threat to caregivers and pastors. Luther also has a word of wisdom for soldiers, helping them to understand their vocation in light of both faith and love, devoting themselves to their work with clear consciences before God (72).

As we face more and more conflicting ideas about what marriage is and isn't in our society, chapter five offers a breath of fresh air on this topic. Luther sees marriage as grounded in creation. He says, "Who is there who does not know that marriage was founded and ordained by God, created in Paradise and confirmed and blessed outside Paradise?" (74). Pless adds a great comment when he says, "God's Word establishes marriage in honor. It is the devil who shames and slanders marriage" (76). Luther has much to say about marriage and in this chapter we find him applying law and gospel in difficult marriage situations. Luther reminds us that marriage is a state under the cross, and the cross puts an end to the romanticism that sees marriage as an instrument of self-fulfillment. Pless concludes the chapter by saying, "Luther knows that all of human life, including marriage, is hallowed and received as a gift" (80).

Mercy is one emphasis of the LCMS, and in chapter six, we find lots of it. Luther was a man who received mercy and he knew how to show mercy to those in spiritual and bodily need, offering pastoral care for the poor, needy, and persecuted. Faith is active in love, and justification by faith frees the Christian to give and serve his/her neighbor. We labor not for ourselves but for the well-being of the people that God has placed in our paths. Luther saw greed as idolatry and a sin against both faith and love; generosity is the way to go when dealing with our neighbor (81, 82). The Reformer was not afraid to speak on behalf of the destitute and persecuted and comfort the imprisoned, pointing to Christ, the One who became flesh to live among us. "The presence of Christ is not an abstraction for Luther. Christ is bodily present through His Word, and no jail cell is so secure as to keep Him out" (86). Christ's presence with his Christians, in suffering, agony, and even death, is a source of real comfort and peace.

The last two chapters deal with the frailty of human life — sickness and death and how to provide pastoral care for the grieving. Sickness and death was an ever-present

reality in Luther's day. The Reformer himself experienced it in his own family when two of his daughters, Elizabeth and Magdalena, died at young ages (109). Luther found comfort in the risen Christ and the doctrine of justification by faith. The Lutheran Reformation provided a new understanding of death and brought to an end the *ars moriendi* practiced in the sixteenth century. As Pless states, "For Luther, the pastoral care of the dying would be marked by the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake and, within that absolution, the sure and certain promise of the resurrection of the body to life everlasting" (102-103).

The book also includes an appendix, "Baptism as Means of Consolation in Luther's Pastoral Theology," which was originally delivered at the International Congress for Luther Research meeting in Copenhagen in August 2002 and later was published in *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (January 2003). In this essay, we learn that Luther did not limit baptism to the moment of the rite, but asserted the enduring benefits of baptism both for daily life and finally for the approach of death itself (119-120). Here we also find Luther ministering to his own mother, Margaret, when she was seriously ill where through a letter he comforts her, directing her to word and sacrament. At the end, he writes,

God has graciously called you. In the Gospel, in Baptism, and in the Sacrament (of the Altar) you possess his sign and seal of this vocation, and as long as you hear him addressing you in these, you will have no trouble of danger. Be of good cheer, then, and thank him joyfully for such great grace, for he who has begun a good work in you will perform until the day of Jesus Christ. We cannot help ourselves in such matters. We can accomplish nothing against sin, death, and the devil by our own works. (120-121)

A lengthy bibliography is also provided at the end of the book for further reading and study of Luther's theology and care of souls.

In *Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross*, Prof. John Pless has done a magnificent work harvesting Luther's thoughts and insights about his pastoral theology. With its many examples and rich quotations from Luther's own pastoral practice, it provides a solid pastoral resource for a true evangelical *seelsorge* (care of souls) that directs sinners to the cross of Christ. With the upcoming anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, I highly recommend pastors reading, studying and discussing this book in their conferences and meetings as they sharpen their

pastoral care skills. I also could see some examples and stories of Luther's pastoral care being used as sermon illustrations and shared in Bible classes as a way of edifying the faithful in the congregation.

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The timeless and eternal power of God's word and the means of grace is what brings new life into a world of death.

# BOOK REVIEW AND COMMENTARY

***Becoming a Level Five Multiplying Church: Field Guide***  
by Dave Ferguson, Alan Hirsch, Todd Wilson (Ebook)

by Tim Droegemueller

**O**UR LORD JESUS CHRIST SPOKE DECISIVELY IN MATTHEW 28:18–20:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

These words, known as the Great Commission, are our commission. And we sincerely thank God for all believers in Christ who consider these words, care about these words, and seek to do what our Lord commands here. It should be clear to all of us that the thrust of the “Becoming Five” concept is the desire to make disciples, and that intention is beautiful.

Secretly, I am always optimistic when reading a book or article that has as its goal the furtherance of making disciples of our Savior. As a church planter and pastor, I want to learn. I want to grow. I want to be held accountable. I want to unlearn bad habits and rejoice in eternally great things. You are reading this mission journal because you feel the same way. Both you and I want to see God's kingdom flourish. We want people to be baptized. We want people to grow strong in the word of God. We want them to learn all things our Lord Jesus commanded for our blessing. We want to see churches planted and churches multiply. And so we all share that commonality with the authors of this book. These authors want to see the Christian climate in our nation change. They want it to improve and so do we! But as G. K. Chesterton once wrote, “The reformer is always right

about what is wrong. He is generally wrong about what is right.” As we all know to be true, proposed solutions to our issues can possibly even lead us into deeper problems. The remedy could prove to be more fatal than the illness. I do not think that this is the case here, but there is the pressing need for bright objectivity.

In this review, I have a frightfully simple goal: to affirm what is good and to reject what is bad. From my perspective, the following are points from “Becoming Five” that are very good:

If we think Jesus' church needs saving, we are functionally screaming every minute of every day against the finished work of Christ on a cross.

1. We want to make biblical disciples and not cultural Christians. Yes.
2. We need a stronger biblical culture within our churches. Yes.
3. We have to ask why we are doing the things we are doing. Yes.
4. Vision, strategy, budget, and priorities matter. Yes.
5. We need to reframe evangelism in the context of discipleship. Yes.
6. The situation is bad and the patient (the church in our country) is mostly sick. A diagnosis should be made. Yes.
7. The methods of mega-churches aren't helping the cause. Appeasing human beings and treating them like customers is wrong. Yes.
8. Catering to cultural Christians in order to get them to stick around is bad. Yes.
9. Jesus' church on earth will always be living with tensions (i.e., the devil, the world, and the fallen flesh). Yes.

10. There is a reasonably large gap between our aspirations and our practices. Yes.
11. The priorities of an addition-focused scorecard will actually become the things that hold us back from multiplication. Yes.
12. Something of little importance can easily become a major focus. This focusing becomes a distraction. Yes.
13. Risk is necessary. Yes.
14. Courage is needed. Yes.
15. Accountability is healthy. Yes.
16. We need strong, faithful, and biblically defined leadership. Yes.
17. The shackles of the status quo need shattering. Yes.
18. Putting an eye on our weaknesses is never easy. Yes.
19. It is hard to break free from bad or obsolete ideas. Yes.
20. The atmosphere of “faking it” is commonplace. The horrible shock of this atmosphere is that people almost have to be meticulously trained to be so contrived and impotent. It requires a dedication to a bad framework and illegitimate vocabulary. Yes.

In addition to the list above, I will also add this: The identification of thoughts and behaviors that contribute to scarce or additional thinking are helpful. They are a pretty exhaustive list and I believe they would be beneficial for a discussion. Many of the goals for starting churches are good goals for us to consider. They push us to think beyond the common misconceptions and pitfalls that keep some congregations from planting churches. Also, the stress on being held accountable is noble. Sometimes we don't want to look honestly at our own situations. And once looking, we certainly don't want someone to hold us accountable to what is really going on! We simply want to exist on the outside of the glass and criticize without ever being in the arena. All of these things can help kick up some dust and get us thinking about our ongoing need for persistent repentance!

And now, as we shift from affirming the good to rejecting the bad, please know this. This critique comes from someone who is in the arena. It comes from someone who cares a great deal about our Lord's Great Commission. It comes from someone who by nature is a

stat junky and addition addict. As a recovering alcoholic once told me, “You can spot it, if you got it.” Remember, at the beginning of this review, I shared my secret optimism about reading something new about church planting or our life of witness. And yet, the other shoe usually drops. Optimism turns to disappointment in a hurry. The disappointment ensues because of a particular void. The void has become typical and commonplace, but it is certainly deafening. And it almost always seems to go unidentified.

This is the same book that has been written in our nation for decades. It is a best seller. The title changes, the costs vary, but the chapters go on and on and on. We have all read it. We have all written it. Lord, have mercy on us all, for we have all recommended it. We love the book because of what it promises. It promises to make Jesus' kingdom work. It tells us that the bride of Christ will finally improve. Each paragraph of each page heralds a future of success if we just do what is asked. We think that by embracing the principles of mission experts, we will become mission experts. Once we are mission experts, we can create other mission experts. All we have to do is

take with water and swallow. In all fairness to the authors here, they say very clearly that their only intent is to champion multiplication, and they do a good job in that task. But still, these are only good chapters of the same book that we keep reading again and again and again. We can't help ourselves. With optimism, we keep reaching for the orange, plastic pill bottle to cure the nausea. But what if

our recipes for success beyond cultural Christianity don't actually cure it, but instead create it?

This is what is bad about “Becoming Five”:

1. The problem is actually worse than we think. This is why we keep swimming in it regardless of our next effort. We can't choose our way out of it. The problem is as big, large, expansive, and inclusive as the spiritual death we inherited from Adam and Eve (ROM 5:12). Perhaps, though we are scared to admit it, original sin and its condition continues to be a bit of a problem. It really is. We are actually not the solution. Ever. Or at all. Pragmatic solutions may not even solve pragmatic problems, let alone an unfixable one.
2. A stronger focus on what we do will not cause us to leave Egypt. More behavioral management will not end the zombie apocalypse (EPH 2:1). Our big problem is

Every step of the way, the bride of Christ will be fighting for her life.

our focus on us. Permit me to be so offensive. How well we dedicate ourselves to manmade principles of the law has little to do with the growth of the kingdom of God. And if we succeed, it will only end up being a bigger bang of a bigger hammer on a bigger gong at the end of the show.

3. As long as the content of our public preaching is about what we can do to be better at doing stuff for Jesus (including reaching out for Jesus) and not Christ and him crucified (from the powerful authority of a biblical text!), the hamster will keep flipping on the wheel. There may be movement, but it won't last long.
4. The theology of glory cannot be "Lutheranized." It just can't. It is not possible. At the very point we do, we "un-Lutheranize" ourselves. We can do it if we want to. No one can keep us from doing it to ourselves. People keep trying and succeeding. But how will it help us? I am not saying that there isn't something we can learn about accountability, the laws of creation, system dynamics, common sense, or the aspects of leadership. We can and we should. But these things are gifts of creation and shouldn't replace the Second and Third Articles of the Apostles' Creed. The exact moment we turn to the mammon plan, we have the wrong operating system. No one can serve two masters. It will either be God or mammon (MATT 6:24). Our confidence will either be Jesus' cross or manly glory. A hybridization won't work. If we have the wrong operating system, we will be failing even as we are succeeding — and multiplying.
5. Human beings have needs so deep that we can't even perceive them. Human beings can't change themselves and their church by targeting Jesus and crafting some goals to help Jesus. That puts us where Jesus should be, and it puts Jesus where we should be. It's not just semantics. If we think Jesus' church needs saving, we are functionally screaming every minute of every day against the finished work of Christ on a cross. It works the other way around. It always has and it always will until judgment day. Jesus targets us and delivers the deeper solution to any physical paralyzation we have through the forgiveness of sins.
6. In "Becoming Five," the spiritual scorecard was criticized. It was done quite skillfully and was even enjoyable to read. And it was meet, right, and salutary to do! And yet what was the solution? A new spiritual

scorecard! And in a few short months, this new spiritual scorecard will be criticized. And what will be the solution? Another new spiritual scorecard! Maybe success isn't the creation of a new spiritual scoreboard, but the cheerful and joyful destruction of all of them. Going scorched earth on the theology of glory may actually not only be fun, but eternally valuable as we live under the singularly different contours of the mercy of the cross!

7. What is necessary isn't a movement of mathematics. The language of measurements, layers, and levels is the language of the law. It works well in Pokémon or Skyrim, but it is the very vocabulary that confuses the church about God's grace. A better movement would be the one that Jesus began in a sealed room with cowardly people in John 20:19-31. It is a movement that defies statistics and probabilities. As part of God's people living in the United States of America today, we could actually see many people rediscover the clearly defined sin snapping and power of God's word and sacraments. Wouldn't that be something?
8. If you want to plant a church, wouldn't you want to actually understand what church is? In fact, isn't that probably the best place to start? And in fact, if you don't know what church is, could you actually be multiplying something different than what our Lord has called us to multiply? The "they" of Acts 2:46-47 only comes after the "they" of Acts 2:42. The early church "they" were gathered around the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers. They gathered around the place where Jesus promised to be (the gospel preached and the Eucharist delivered). As a by-product of the word and sacraments, there were miracles, awe, generosity, praise of God, favor with the people, and growth. You can't put the cart before the horse. You also can't produce a horse by building a cart.
9. The Great Commission is not what we do for Jesus' Great Commission. There is no need to look for a new interpretation of disciple making. Jesus interprets it himself. He says to make disciples by "baptizing them" and "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (MATT 28:19-20). The first part of what we are called to do until the Parousia of Jesus is to baptize all people in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I'm not trying to be picky, obstinate, or a killjoy, but the word *baptism* should make the radar. It should be in the book. Jesus said it himself.

10. A very large part of what Jesus commanded us to observe, which is the second part of Christ's Great Commission, is Holy Communion. How is it possible to walk in unity as the body of Christ when we can't even "Amen!" where Jesus gives us his powerfully unifying gifts? If we cannot agree on where Jesus does his unifying (i.e., the means of grace), should we expect anything beyond division?
11. A paradigm will not unlock Jesus' people, but it could certainly make them sick. If the bride of Christ has been feeding on a multitude of paradigms for a very long time, she might not even know which "medicine" is killing her. She is suffering more from misdiagnosis than anything.
12. What about the sabotage of Christian marriage over the last few decades? How has it affected the church? After the slow, steady dismantling of any love or respect for this gift over the last fifty plus years, it has to be addressed. It has to be addressed constantly and repeatedly. If husbands and wives aren't equipped for their commission and roles, won't we continue to multiply sad standards and dysfunctional spiritual behavior?
13. What about kids? What about having a little longer term plan? How can we raise babies in an environment where they can hear the word, grow in a confession of Christ, and get extremely used to confessing their own sin and rejoicing in the good news of Jesus' mercy for sinners? How can this become commonplace for baptized and redeemed saints? How does the liturgy affect this training? How about something like the Lord's Prayer? Or the expectation of all our families to simply attend Bible study and Sunday school?
14. Every step of the way, the bride of Christ will be fighting for her life. Babylon wants her back and there is always the temptation to regain friendship with the world (Jas 4:4). Throw in the seductive proposals of the demonic realm. And now add the biblical truth that we are also always fighting ourselves. Romans 7 gives us a good look at this corrupt nature! Let's just say, there will be a measure of messiness in the church! It will not be heaven on earth! However... and yet ... in spite of this colossal messiness, Jesus is still Lord of it!
15. Part of the beauty of what all Christians should hold dear is how we are called to enter this messiness with the very mercy of the cross! Works of mercy have become an endangered species in our land as more and more people focus on "getting the results." Only the theology of the cross grasps the heart of the unreasonable love of God for broken people in Christ. Ongoing mercy ministry would be extremely important in terms of engaging a society that has forgotten what love is. Again, this was not the focus of the authors, but this is a crucial need in not only our mission churches, but in all our churches.
16. God continues to work through people who aren't very skilled. My closest advisor often encourages me with these words: "Lots of people dumber than us have done this." What a comfort! The Lord works through his people in spite of all their weaknesses. In fact, those weaknesses can even be the very megaphone where he proclaims the mercy of his Son through our lives!
17. The Christian church grows and multiplies best within the context of persecution. I know of one Mekane Yesus church in Debre Zeit, Ethiopia, that gave birth to fifteen other churches within a few days! It was at the same time that the bullets were raining down upon the saints who steadfastly refused to give up the preaching and teaching about Jesus Christ our Lord. Lives were lost repeatedly at the hands of the socialists, but in the end, the gospel of Christ triumphed! It will be hard for congregations to grow the right way in an environment of apathy and affluence. It just will. Perhaps we need to begin a process of humbling ourselves and start relearning some things from our Lutheran pastors coming from different parts of the world. They know what it's like to stand close to the fire. They have been tested in it and by it. Many of them have given up everything for the sake of biblical conviction. They have no pension, no trust fund, no savings, and sometimes no idea even where they are going, but they trust the Lord of the church as they "Go" (GEN 12:1-3)! There is much to learn from them.
18. Teaching what is true about the Bible matters. We could even get to the point where we call this true teaching "sound" or "healthy" doctrine. We want to eat healthy food; don't we want healthy and accurate teaching from the Bible? People keep saying ad infinitum and ad nauseam that doctrine doesn't matter. They say in essence, "all that matters is what we do for Jesus." That isn't true! The content of your mission is like the contents of a doctor's syringe. The doctor

could do a double back flip before the inoculation, but if there is water in the syringe, it won't cure the disease. There is only one antidote! If the antidote isn't there for our deadly disease of sin, we are lost! The fact that Jesus reconciled a spoiled, sinful humanity to himself through his innocent blood even before we loved him is a doctrine. That truth matters! That is the central doctrine of not just the Lutherans, but all Christians, and it is called justification! Accurate biblical doctrine matters. It is always a matter of eternal life and death. Looking at the lack of godly offspring in our nation should cause every one of us to repent. We have not passed down the faith. If we pass down the word of God as we have been called to do, we could actually see a turnaround for the churches of the USA in two decades. Now that's not a quick solution, but it may be just what the Great Physician ordered (DEUT 6:6-9).

Summary: The one problem is this simple. We trust our plans to help Jesus succeed in his mission. If we continue to do this, expect more of the same. And if any of us linger on as stat junkies and addition addicts, the jitters are probably going to get worse. And yet, for all preachers of paradigms and followers of fads, there is a bright and eternal road. The great thing about reading a book like this and considering the plummeting numbers is to rejoice that Jesus already undid the math. He himself fills the broken equation with his divine word and blessings. The stuff that he does goes way beyond improving situations and adjusting our plans. He actually raises people from the dead so that they no longer trust the methods of this age (COL 2:8-12). Yes, we will always be trying to reform something in this life. Absolutely. But what makes Christians different is that they have actually been discovered by the Solution. And now as we live under the eternally fresh riptide of our baptism into Christ (1 COR 6:9-11), the greasy helpings of platitudes just don't taste the same.

Consider this: Whether or not you actually believe the divine word of the Son of God who miraculously delivers forgiveness, salvation, and even a new identity from beyond the grave actually makes a pretty big difference in how you see life, mission, family, and church (ROM 6:3-5; COL 2:11-12). The timeless and eternal power of God's word and the means of grace is what brings new life into a world of death. So this is what we trust as we are "going into all the world" wherever our vocations find us. Period.

This shouldn't slow us down in our church planting, but rather send us out in confidence even in the midst of our colossal failures!

For anyone interested in church planting, I would suggest reading something quite shocking. In *Luther's Works*, Volume 41, pp. 148-165, there is an arsenal of powerful weapons against the devil, world, and flesh that perfectly equip us for the days ahead. The reason the weapons are powerful is precisely because they weren't crafted by us. If you have become curious enough after reading this, investigate them for yourself. We are not alone nor are we left alone (JOHN 14:18). Christ reigns at the right hand for such a time as this and he has rained down his comforter, the Holy Spirit, upon his people. Until the close of the age, there will be a people on this planet with whom our triune God will dwell! What joy and comfort and courage this gives us for our future! The true miracle is this: In spite of all our efforts to improve Jesus' kingdom on earth, his kingdom has not only survived, but grown! The miracle of all of this is that for all the bad medication we have been doling out to the bride of Christ, she keeps springing out of her chair. Like an annoying or obnoxious gnat, she keeps exasperating all those still trapped in the common philosophies of this age. May all look in on her wonder and rejoice in her Groom! His beloved church cannot fail and will not go away. We have our Lord's promise on it (MATT 28:20).

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. Matt 28:19-20

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Anyone engaged in Lutheran mission and preaching today will find challenges and encouragement in this volume.

# BOOK REVIEW AND COMMENTARY

## ***Feasting in a Famine of the Word: Lutheran Preaching in the Twenty-First Century***

Edited by Mark W. Birkholz, Jacob Corzine, and Jonathan Mumme. Forward by Jonathan Fisk (Eugene: Pickwick, 2016)

by Joshua C. Miller

St. Paul states in Romans 10 that faith comes by hearing the gospel through a preacher. In the Augsburg Confession, Phillip Melancthon declares that God has established the preaching office in order to bestow justification on sinners. The Lutheran sense of mission is built on the preaching office, since it is through it that sinners are saved and believers comforted. In this volume, seventeen contemporary Lutheran pastors and theologians reflect on the nature of preaching guided by the theological understanding that salvation in Christ is given through preaching (xvii).

In his opening chapter, John Bombaro gives a survey of American homiletics describing what kinds of preaching prevail today and demonstrating the unique charism Lutheran preaching has to offer in the situation. Bombaro evaluates many of the homiletical styles popular in contemporary Christianity, finding helpful things in some of them, but also finding many lacking in terms of how they often do not actually deal with a biblical text and “routinely abandon gospel proclamation for thematic exploration resulting in moralizing or patronizing” (17). In Bombaro’s estimation, the main reason for such preaching today is the prevalence of consumerism. He maintains that preachers often preach poor sermons out of a desire to fulfill the consumeristic desires of their hearers rather than out of a deep understanding of the true task of the preacher (26). Drawing on the work of Gerhard Forde, Johann Micahel Reu, C. F. W. Walther, and Timothy Wengert, Bombaro identifies the true task of the preacher as proclaiming God’s condemning law and God’s saving gospel in first person address to the hearers of the sermon (20–26).

In the following essays each author expounds on important aspects of this task. Mark Birkholz emphasizes the necessity of certainty when preaching. St. Peter rested his case on the certainty of Jesus’ death and resurrection, proclaiming Christ’s work for hearers (36–39). The preacher today can also boldly proclaim that the forgiveness of sins and salvation is certain, trusting the Holy Spirit to work faith in hearers’ hearts (40–42). Paul Elliott argues that typology can be an appropriate tool for preaching the Old Testament because the apostle Paul preached that “in Christ” Christians are part of “Israel reduced to one” (55–56). Elliott identifies the texts about ancient Israel as a nation, Israel’s institutions, and the Psalms (especially those of lament) as appropriate venues for using typology about Israel to speak to Christians today (61).

Richard Serena, Roy Coates, and Jacob Corzine all bring insights from historical figures into the conversation. Serena comments on Nicholas of Cusa as a preacher. While Serena rejects the idea of Cusa as a proto-reformer, he does note certain parallels between the Lutheran

The preacher today can also boldly proclaim that the forgiveness of sins and salvation is certain, trusting the Holy Spirit to work faith in hearers’ hearts.

understanding of the preacher giving Christ to hearers and Cusa’s own notion of the preacher as a chef who serves up the word of God to the hungry (71). Coates discusses how Johann Gerhard understood systematic theology and preaching to exist symbiotically, as preaching keeps systematic theology from becoming philosophical and speculative while systematic theology gives content and basis to preaching so that it does not devolve into sheer moralism (79, 95–96). Corzine utilizes Johannes Brenz’s distinction between *fides visibilia* (faith evident in visible confession) and *fides invisibilia* (the faith of infants

and children flourishing into confession) (101–111). One of Corzine’s central points can comfort preachers and hearers alike. Doubt, he says, is not an absence of faith (unbelief) but an expressed need for assurance that Christ gives through the preacher (115–116).

Jonathan Mumme and Steven Paulson highlight the importance of direct address. Mumme explores the use of such differentiated address by Paul and Luther, identifying the preacher as the medium for the voice of God directly to the hearers (137). Similarly, preaching, says Paulson, “is not merely speaking about God, but speaking for God” (143). Eschewing analogy, Paulson argues for a homiletic that really preaches Christ directly to hearers in the effective words, “I forgive you!” (143–155).

Other authors expound on aspects of the preacher’s task or connections between preaching and divine service, theology, and the Christian life. Hans Jörg Voigt navigates the troubled waters of paraenesis (exhortation to good works), counselling that the preacher must be careful not to confuse law and gospel. Paraenesis should be understood as the law in its third use, so as not to portray the gospel as making demands. At the same time, the law does not empower the believer to bear the fruit of the Spirit that flows from faith; only the gospel can do that. Moreover, the preacher should proclaim the gospel louder and larger than the paraenesis itself, ensuring that the hearer is comforted (163–164).

John Pless, John Kleinig, and David Petersen address the connections between preaching, the liturgy, and communion. Pless emphasizes that liturgical preaching should be evangelical. The preacher should not merely talk about liturgical or sacramental action but actually perform it. Drawing on Forde and Oswald Bayer, Pless says that the sermon should “deliver the goods of the promise and not get lost in analogies to washing and meals” (177). Likewise, Kleinig admonishes that the preacher should not just say that life is available but identify where (i.e., in the Lord’s Supper) and then give it to the hearers (179, 190). Petersen encourages preaching in every service and emphasizes that the preacher should preach the promise of the gospel in Scripture directly to hearers and not simply impersonally read the text (208).

Esko Murto underlines the connection between preaching and the doctrine of original sin. Abandoning this doctrine, says Murto, leaves the door open to works righteousness. Then, warns Murto soberly, salvation is up to the supposedly free will of the individual and the preaching office becomes merely a marketing venture (223).

Jeremiah Johnson and Jakob Appell connect preaching with pastoral care. In what is perhaps the most touchingly pastoral essay in the book, Johnson stresses the importance of preaching lament for Christians undergoing suffering. He offers lament (crying out to God on the basis of God’s promise in the midst of suffering) as a gift from God through which the Christian may find a vehicle for the anger and grief that comes in suffering (226, 238–239). Appell addresses preaching as the cure of souls, wherein the pastor is a physician administering the word and sacraments to the patient (255–256).

In the final two chapters of the book, Daniel Schmidt and Gottfried Martens address some practical homiletic concerns. Schmidt encourages preaching in the present tense to be present to their hearers (274). Martens admonishes the preacher to bring out the law and the gospel in the text rather than to woodenly (in the “Prussian” style) force categories of generic law and gospel on the hearers, as well as to preach the promise of the gospel indicatively to hearers (296–298).

Anyone engaged in Lutheran mission and preaching today will find challenges and encouragement in this volume. Though it focuses much on theory, the book also highlights significant practical concerns, including the use of direct address, personal pronouns, and present tense, and faithfulness to the text. Each essay is focused but never loses sight of the goal of preaching — to give salvation to the hearers. The authors here present a much more evangelical approach to preaching than some popular consumer-centric methods, one that recognizes and proclaims the truly effective means of mission and preaching — the preached gospel of Christ that is the means of grace itself. Preachers reading this volume will find encouragement to be faithful in their callings, but they also may find their own faith strengthened by the gospel.

Each essay is focused but never loses sight of the goal of preaching — to give salvation to the hearers.

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