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In review:

“YOU HAVE THE WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE”: TRANSFORMATIVE READINGS OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN FROM A LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE. The Lutheran World Federation (Documentation 57/2012). Ed. Kenneth Mtata.

by **Christopher Wright Mitchell**

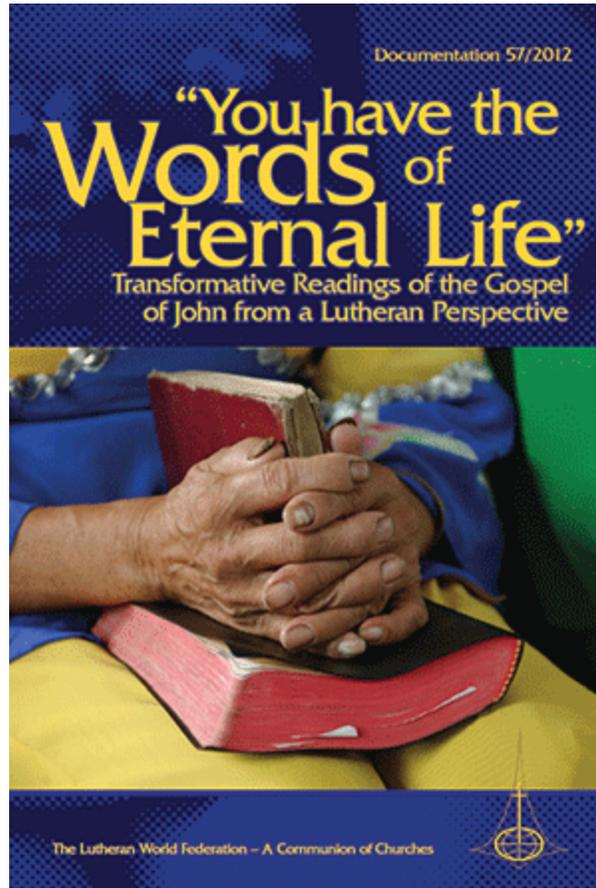
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I. On hermeneutics

The importance of hermeneutics for the theology and mission of the church can hardly be overestimated. All Christian churches begin with the Bible. The hermeneutics employed to interpret the Bible determine the direction in which that church will move and what its message will be. Sound hermeneutics enable a church to faithfully proclaim the Word of God, through which He bestows eternal life in Jesus Christ. Corrupt hermeneutics destroy the ability of a church to preach the Gospel, and eventually steer a church into heresy, apostasy, and eternal judgment.

Traditionally the field of biblical hermeneutics has begun with the goal of interpreting the divine message of the sacred Scriptures with accuracy and fidelity based on the text's original language (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek), analyzing how it spoke to its first audience, taking into consideration such contextual factors as the ancient historical and cultural settings. Then traditional hermeneutics asks how the original meaning is to be articulated for the church today. Recognizing that the Word of God endures forever and remains universally true, the goal is to apply God's message appropriately given our vastly different languages and diverse historical and cultural settings. The purpose of the entire hermeneutical enterprise, from written text to proclamation to contemporary appropriation by faith, can be compared to the evangelist's own stated goal: "These things stand written for the purpose that you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and so that by believing you have life in his name" (John 20:31, reviewer's translation).

It may be impossible to summarize the contents of *"You have the Words of Eternal Life": Transformative Readings of the Gospel of John from a Lutheran Perspective* in a way that is completely fair to the diverse viewpoints presented in the essays. Some degree of oversimplification is unavoidable. This review endeavors to offer some summary comments based on commonalities shared by several of the authors, supported by the explicit statements of some (and inferences based on others), with the recognition that some of the contributors might disagree. Following these general observations, some specific comments about each of the essays will be offered.



This book presents a collection of essays from scholars around the world, who offer a variety of nuanced and learned perspectives on the Gospel of St. John. Some are constructive and insightful; others, less so. Some disagree with others in certain respects, and a few might even be said to contradict themselves. This book, then, does not present one simple or coherent thesis, but an array of ideas. The publisher apparently intends the reader to look for common threads that run throughout the essays. On the other hand, it would seem that the publisher has included competing and even conflicting viewpoints for the purpose of suggesting that such hermeneutical diversity is tolerable or even welcome within the church. By letting clashing ideas stand beside one another, the publisher may be implying that there is no “right answer” to some hermeneutical questions, or that what is “true” for one church in one part of the globe may not be “true” for another. This raises the question, then, of whether the sponsoring agency, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), believes in the concept of absolute, eternal Truth—a key theme in St. John’s Gospel—or whether it is proposing that “truth” is a relative concept in constant need of redefinition (as is openly advocated by some of the essays).

The book as a whole discourages the pursuit of traditional hermeneutics, namely, the importance of understanding the biblical text more fully so as to be able to proclaim its message more faithfully. Instead, various essays attack the idea that the biblical text is truth, or even that its original message can be discerned by readers today. Instead of letting Scripture be interpreted by Scripture alone, authors argue that the church should proclaim interpretations shaped by the particular context, needs, and wants of each hearing community. Authors clearly urge churches not to place the highest priority on preaching the biblical teachings about the person and work of Christ for our salvation; instead, they urge churches to be open to novel interpretations of the Word which the Spirit allegedly is inspiring in the church today.

The result is an open-ended view of the Word of God as something flexible and always changing or in need of change—a tenet of a kind of progressive revelation, not unlike that of the Church of Rome. At its core, this view of the Word is anti-Lutheran; it destroys the (commonly called) formal principle of Lutheran theology—that the Scriptures are the sole source and norm of the Christian faith and life—which was so vital to the reformers that they placed it at the start of the Formula of Concord (and which some authors quote before leaving behind). This hermeneutic is anti-ecumenical and schismatic because it fractures the unity of the church built on the Word. Indeed, it is anti-Christian, for it is by remaining in the Word that one remains a disciple of Christ and receives knowledge of the truth (cf. John 8:31-32). This hermeneutic leaves the church vulnerable to heresy, if not a sponsor of it.

It also affects the shape of the Christian life in the realm of sexuality and marriage. Early on, the book refers to the “ethical” issue “of human sexuality” (8). In the middle of the book (41-46, 71), convoluted gender-neutral language for God appears (e.g., “Godself” in place of “himself”), raising the question of why the LWF (with the acquiescence of all but one author, Wilson; see the revealing footnote on page 85) is so adamant about avoiding the gendered language used in the Bible to refer to the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Suspicious that distorted language for God is linked to a distortion of gendered human relationships are explicitly confirmed in the penultimate essay of the book (Melanchthon), which condones adultery, degrades marriage, and actually praises sexual “transgression.” In what can only be called blasphemy, the essay suggests that the polyandrous Samaritan woman of John 4 may be the one “opening the eyes of Jesus” (145)! Jesus is the one who needs to be enlightened by the adulteress living in sin! The reader of these essays must wonder whether homosexual relations too are on the interpretive horizon. Acceptance and advocacy of sexual sin can only take place after the Word of God has been completely nullified through “transformational hermeneutics.” This should be of great concern to any Christian and any church body which understands that Christ’s love entails a paradigm for marriage and sexuality (cf. John 2:1-11; 3:29; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Galatians 5:16-24; and Ephesians 5).

II. The Bible, the Scriptures, and the Word of God

A recurring thesis (appearing first in Grosshans) is that the Bible, the Holy Scriptures, and the Word of God are not identical, coterminous, or concurrent, but are a trichotomy. These three distinct entities are distanced from each other sequentially: “The Bible is a book (*like other religious books*) which becomes Holy Scripture in its use in the church and which *may* become the Word of God when people are addressed by it in a salvific way” (25, emphasis added). The purpose of this artificial partitioning is to permit different churches to hold different and even contradictory understandings of what the “Word of God” is. Thus, the Bible or Scripture no longer serves as the clear, authoritative source and norm for all doctrine and practice. Instead, each church body ends up with its own “Word of God” shaped by its own particular “context.”

These essays not only allow, but actively call for churches to construe the same biblical texts in different ways that permit doctrines and practices which deviate from those in the Bible (see below). This document makes no exegetical attempt to justify the trichotomy of Bible, Holy Scriptures, and Word of God [Grosshans attempts to extract it from a single Luther statement taken out of *context*!] The Bible can be considered “like other religious books” only if one has already renounced the Bible’s divine inspiration and normative character, or has elevated the scriptures and beliefs of other religions to be on par with Christianity (hardly something justified by the Gospel of John).

The trichotomy’s fallacy can readily be demonstrated by pondering any number of biblical texts. For example, Ezekiel is told to “prophesy to the mountains of Israel, and say, O mountains of Israel, hear the Word of the LORD” (Ezekiel 36:1; cf 6:3 and 36:4, 6). The divine message is “the Word of the Lord” even when addressed to geographical features, and not (directly) to any people, nor in any salvific way (this text is part of a judgment oracle). Defining the Word of God as that spoken only “in a salvific way” (25) would prevent any of the Bible’s judgments from being considered a “Word of God.” This is Gospel reductionism gone bonkers.

III. The essays

The remainder of this review will touch on noteworthy points made in each essay in the order they appear in the book, since the ordering clearly is intentional.

1. Preliminary matters

First, however, the book's subtitle deserves attention: "Transformative Readings . . ." The verbal adjective "transformative" implies that someone is transforming something from one state or condition into another. Who is doing the action? Upon what object? By what means? And to what end? The preface (Junge) explains: "Biblical interpretation contributes to solidifying Christian commitment to *social transformation*" (5, emphasis added). Thus, by means of biblical interpretation (via the proposed hermeneutics), Christians are to commit to transforming society. Absent is the language of missions or evangelism or ministry, or even any reference to Jesus Christ. Nothing is said here about the proclamation of the Gospel, the conversion of unbelievers, or the bestowal of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Word and Sacrament. Many Scripture passages depict the mission Jesus gave to his church; none is better known than the Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations" by "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" and by "teaching them to observe everything I have commanded" (Matthew 28:19). Christ's commission is to be the mission of the church "until the consummation of the age" (Matthew 28:28). But in the preface, any hint of that mission has been replaced by "social transformation."

Laudably, the introduction (Mtata) mentions some basic and essential hermeneutical principles. It alludes to the Rule and Norm of the Formula of Concord while quoting a LWF document: "The Lutheran churches subscribing to the LWF have committed themselves to 'confess the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the only source and norm of its doctrine, life and service.'" The author goes on to include the Creeds and Confessions of the Lutheran Church (7-8). Perhaps, one might believe, the introduction is amending the preface.

The introduction continues, however, pursuing a second kind of "reading" mentioned in the preface: "'Reading' is one's ability to make sense and make the best of (maximize) one's environment" (7). The reader's own context is thus used to shape the reading of the biblical text. This reviewer affirms a partial truth in this agenda: certainly every interpretation is inevitably shaped by the interpreter's presuppositions (part of the hermeneutical circle or spiral), but that is reason for the interpreter to be self-aware and self-critical, not a license for proposing whatever interpretation seems most expedient for accomplishing social transformation.

The introduction then advocates the avoidance of "two extremes." "The first," it explains, "is to assume that what is written in the biblical texts should be taken literally and applied directly to contemporary life. The second is to assume that, due to their antiquity, the sacred texts are too alien to be relied on for shaping contemporary faith and life."

Maneuvering between these two extremes is one task of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) hermeneutics process of which this volume is the first product” (7). Thus the envisioned agenda would seem to involve a *via media* between literal(istic?) interpretation and rank unbelief. Again, there is some truth here. For example, as the Gospel of John shows, the Law of Moses that was prescribed for Israel is recast by Jesus in his teachings for his disciples and the church. But why should a study of biblical hermeneutics even include the second “extreme”—namely, that Scripture is irrelevant? Such a wide and broad road leaves room for many travelers to abut the second extreme.

2. “*Lutheran Hermeneutics: An outline*”

In “*Lutheran Hermeneutics: An Outline*,” Grosshans develops the trichotomy of Bible/Scripture/Word of God previously mentioned in the introduction (and referenced above in this review). “One’s engagement with the text,” he explains, “is determined by whether one is simply reading the ‘Bible,’ the ‘Holy Scriptures’ or encountering the ‘Word of God’ ” (20). This novel construct enables people with “a shared hermeneutical framework” to have “plurality and conflicting interpretations’ (22). In other words, it prevents the Bible from functioning as the source and norm of faith and life for all Christians.

In several places the author seems to contradict his own quotations or summaries of Luther: “Luther did not understand every biblical text to be of relevance for Christians” but Luther believed “without doubt the entire Scripture is oriented toward Christ alone” (27). If all Scripture is oriented toward Christ, why would any of it be irrelevant for Christians? On the next page Grosshans rightly states that Luther “believed the Holy Scripture to be self-authenticating: Holy Scripture has and needs no guarantor other than itself.” But this militates against Grosshans’ view that interpretation is validated by the interpreter and his particular context.

The author then seems to side with Flaccius versus Schwenckfeld (35-40), with Flaccius advocating the inspiration of Scripture and the importance of the Word and Sacraments as the means by which God deals with us, and Schwenckfeld advocating the role of faith and the Spirit even before and apart from Scripture. However, the position of Flaccius excludes Grosshans’ trichotomy and the overall thrust of the essays collected in this book.

In his conclusion, Grosshans attempts to depict traditional Christian hermeneutics as a kind of imperialism: “The Triune God is not an imperialistic emperor who has only one message for everybody in the world and wants everybody to live their lives in the same way.” Such inflammatory rhetoric is undoubtedly designed to evoke antipathy from those in post-colonial contexts. Is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ God’s “one message” for all humanity? Is not the new baptismal life in Christ the “same way” in which God desires everyone to live?

3. “Luther’s Relevance for Contemporary Hermeneutics”

“Luther’s Relevance for Contemporary Hermeneutics” (Hentschel) includes a strident (militaristic, imperious?) attack on the very idea of absolute truth: “From a Christian perspective, truth cannot be understood as a true and verifiable statement about reality” (64; cf. “What is truth?” John 18:38). “Even such words as ‘meaning,’ ‘reading,’ ‘history,’ or ‘truth’ are not really clear and have changed their meaning over the centuries” (65).

Moreover, the essay denies that truth can be communicated through a written text; that any Scripture passage in fact has one correct interpretation; and that anyone today could claim to know what a Scripture passage means. “With reference to the Bible, this means that we cannot understand it from an objective and stable position” (51). “The widespread assumption that literal meaning is to be identified with historical meaning and the author’s historical intention is the literal truth of a text is obviously neither reasonable nor valid” (54). The author anachronistically asserts that such postmodernism also characterized ancient times: “The idea that a text may have just one meaning that once grasped remains firm and unchanging for all time is a modern concept, which neither the biblical authors nor Martin Luther subscribed to” (54). Really!

The inspiration of Scripture (e.g., 2 Peter 1:21) is transmuted: “The biblical text itself cannot be seen as complete and sufficient... Biblical hermeneutics must be grounded in the concept of a reader whose reading process is *inspired* by the Holy Spirit” (57, emphasis added). Thus, *inspiration* supposedly is what happens when moderns read and interpret Scripture. In the sixteenth century Luther strove against this kind of open-ended doctrine of revelation when Rome claimed the pope (and councils) had such power. This essay’s view (see also Olson’s concluding reflections) might be perceived as a reiteration of Rome’s doctrine but with modern scholars occupying the papacy. The clarity of Scripture and the hermeneutical axiom that Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture are also redefined by Hentschel (65-67). “A formal understanding of the Lutheran *sola scriptura* misses the point about his hermeneutical insights for he knew that the texts of the Bible cannot be brought together to form an unambiguous theological system” (67).

These hermeneutics deny that it is possible for anyone to be sure what a text means. “If the meaning of relevant words is ambiguous, how then can a sentence, i.e., a network of words, or even a whole text, a network of sentences, be clear at all? Hermeneutics warns us about taking too simply the idea that a biblical text says what I think it means” (66). “Interpretations that propose being the one and only true interpretation of Scripture are to be criticized” (67). Here the Bible is treated far worse than any other kind of literature. Diligent study of other ancient texts in their original languages (e.g., the Akkadian inscriptions in the palace of Sargon; the Attic Greek of Plato) does enable a modern learned reader to gain a fairly good grasp of what ancient authors likely meant. Why should we consider biblical texts to be inferior and incapable of the same kind of communication?

A self-contradiction inherent in this approach is susceptible to a *reductio ad absurdum*. Did the author of this essay intend for it to communicate any meaning? If it were impossible for a reader in a different context to determine with any degree of confidence the author's original intended meaning, why did the author bother to write in the first place? And why should anyone read it, if any reader who claims to know what it means ("true interpretation") is "to be criticized"?

4. *"An Introduction to the Gospel of John and Questions of Lutheran Hermeneutics"*

"An Introduction to the Gospel of John and Questions of Lutheran Hermeneutics" (Koester) the most exegetically satisfying part of the book. At last, an essay that truly engages Scripture! It is not structured by (nor concerned with) the tripartition of Grosshans. Instead, it develops themes in the Gospel in a helpful sequence wherein each theme builds on previous ones. Taking a cue from Luther, Koester first focuses on "the Word" who became incarnate (70). Next, Jesus' words are connected to his seven signs (actions). "Because the signs are ambiguous, the Gospel must shape the readers' understanding of them through the words of the surrounding literary context" (76). Both Jesus' words and his signs are interpreted in light of his crucifixion and resurrection, where his work reaches fruition, and he communicates God's love, which forms community. The author demonstrates how the Lutheran dialectic of Law and Gospel is "helpful" for the interpretation of John (78-79). These hermeneutics are largely in accord with traditional Lutheran theology.

The reason why this book on hermeneutics has chosen to focus on John becomes clear here: it is because of the way this Gospel depicts the relationship between the Word and the Spirit. "What readers living after the first Easter have are the words of testimony handed on through the community of faith. The Gospel presents this testimony in written form so that those of later generations might believe and have life (Jn 20:30-31). The Gospel also recognizes that words do not create and strengthen faith on their own and that it is the Spirit that continues to make the words effective" (80). The conclusion calls for Christian unity: "The Gospel of John speaks of a unity or oneness that centers on a shared faith, which brings people of different backgrounds together in the crucified and living Christ" (84). Instead of "shared faith," however, the basis for Christian unity is Christ and his Word (through which the Spirit creates the faith that is shared).

5. *"Law and Gospel (With a Little Help from St John)"*

Doctrinally, "Law and Gospel (With a Little Help from St John)" (Wilson) is one of the best essays (together with Wannewetsch) because of its solid Lutheran theology of Law and Gospel, based on Scripture, in harmony with Luther, with salutary application to the church today. There seems to be no spurious transmutation of traditional theological vocabulary. "Law and gospel—more precisely, the distinction between law and gospel—is one of the nearest and dearest characteristics of Lutheran theology. It is not one piece

of the puzzle among others, but the hermeneutical expression of justification by faith” (85). Much more is quoteworthy.

6. *“Political Love: Why John’s Gospel is not as Barren for Contemporary Ethics as it Might Appear”*

“Political Love: Why John’s Gospel is not as Barren for Contemporary Ethics as it Might Appear” (Wannenwetsch) pleases the readers who delights in a literary turn of phrase and who are looking for sound theology and practice. Initially it explores the moral or ethical dimensions of the Gospel of John before turning to broader topics of hermeneutics: “We are to embrace a canonical approach that assumes the authoritative role for Christian discourses of Scripture as a whole, which implies the challenge to withstand the impulse to flee from or ignore the apparently difficult, non-congenial or scandalous passages in the canon.... In keeping with the Reformation slogan of relating Scripture and Tradition as *norma normans* to *norma normata*, I suggest reading Scripture as a sort of critical interlocutor of our tradition, so as eventually to trigger a fresh reading of both” (95). The essay also appears to affirm historic Christian values about the vital role of the family in society, including reproduction and pedagogy, i.e., the birth and raising of children (103-104). In the context of the present volume, it is indeed refreshing and encouraging!

7. *“Exploring Effective Context – Luther’s Contextual Hermeneutics”*

“Exploring Effective Context – Luther’s Contextual Hermeneutics” (Westhelle) starts by defining “context” by recourse to the etymology and analogy of weaving a tapestry, to rightly emphasize the importance of interpreting biblical texts in their original contexts. But the rest of the essay focuses almost exclusively on the “effective context” of the receivers (readers) of the text. He begins rather abruptly in the nineteenth century with Schleiermacher, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur (persons already explored in previous essays) before discussing the historical critical method and liberation theologies. “The meaning of a text changes decisively depending on a series of factors: the author’s setting, the circumstances under which a text is read, and also texts that are in- or excluded” (108). This author too apparently presumes that Scripture has no absolute, enduring meaning. The eternal God was not able, or did not intend, to communicate an immutable message through the Scriptures; or whatever the original, authoritatively-intended meaning might have been, readers today are unable to recover it with any certainty because of our own different contexts.

As hermeneutical opponents he invokes “the fundamentalists” who “reject the importance of any sense of context: the grammar and placement within the work, the circumstances surrounding the author, and definitely the context of the receiving end were decried. The letter, the written word, is to be maintained in its assumed pristine purity” (p. 110). This reviewer puzzled over who the author might intend to include among these unidentified “fundamentalists,” and whether he has set up a straw man. In any event, confessional Lutherans (past and present) who adhere to the high view of Scripture hardly fit this

description. (Exegetes will notice a few gaffes, e.g., the assertion that Gnosticism was pervasive already in the first century AD context of John's Gospel (109), and a couple of Greek mistakes, e.g., the statement about the connotation of *parousia* on page 117 and the transliteration *metamorphete* on page 119.)

8. "Lutheran Hermeneutics and New Testament Studies: Some Political and Cultural Implications"

The author of "Lutheran Hermeneutics and New Testament Studies: Some Political and Cultural Implications" (Becker) has resided in lands whose cultural and political histories have been strongly influenced by Luther. She starts out "looking for Lutheran tendencies in recent Protestantism in European cultures and/or in a globalized world" (122) and perceives a stream of tradition from Paul to Luther (accused of anti-Judaism) to Bultmann to contemporary Protestant theology. "This leads us to the following preliminary conclusion: Our dealing with Lutheran hermeneutics partly has enormous political implications. In this light, it becomes obvious that it is still a matter of debate to what extent Luther's theological focus on justification and its hermeneutical implications are, in principle, legitimate or at least useful" (125).

She conceives of the church's agenda in these terms: "Twenty-first-century Lutheran hermeneutics still faces an immense political dimension. It will have to figure out how the Pauline doctrine of justification can be based on New Testament writings in such a way that it finally stabilizes the peaceful coexistence of Judaism and Christianity in and beyond European culture(s)" (125). This presupposes that cultural peace is the top priority, and that the message of the NT itself—about justification!—may need modification in order to accomplish the higher goal. Modern political and social needs take precedence over Scripture. Since *sola fide* is the article by which the church stands or falls, the very life and existence of the church is at stake here.

9. "Bible, Tradition and the Asian Context"

"Bible, Tradition and the Asian Context" (Melanchthon) confronts the reader with horrific human rights violations in the context of armed conflict in the Indian state of Manipur. The author's strategy seems to be to convince the reader that these atrocities are so appalling (which indeed they are), the church must make the righting of these wrongs the supreme agenda. The interpretation of Scripture is subservient to these goals: defend human rights, protect the poor, make communities inclusive (in terms of caste, ethnicity, religions, and people infection with HIV and AIDS); protect the environment; and resist oppression. "This requires that scholars provide interpretations of Scripture and tradition that are in some organic manner connected to the many communities that experience the problems highlighted above. *These interpretations have to be different from traditional biblical interpretations*, innovative, and constantly in dialogue with the new questions and issues as they emerge on the continent" (p. 138, emphasis added). In this vision, Scripture has ceased to be the only source and norm for the Christian faith and life. There

is no talk about the church as the gathering of the baptized around the Word and Sacrament, to be conformed to Christ, to be led by the Spirit into truth.

The author speaks autobiographically about this reordering of priorities. After mentioning “sola scriptura,” “the centrality of Christ,” and “the sacrament of baptism” (p. 143), she states, “I agree that my identity as a Lutheran should draw upon my Lutheran heritage. But I am also an Indian and a woman and all these should also figure in the manner in which I approach the Bible.... How can one best address the complexities of the Bible, the Lutheran tradition and the Indian context without privileging any one in particular?” Thus, the essentials of the Christian faith are not to be “privileged” over other concerns. Even one’s identity as a baptized believer is reduced to the level of other identity markers, contradicting Galatians 3:26-29 where baptism into Christ supersedes matters of race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Melanchthon declares that interpreters of Scripture must be bold in “challenging traditional and orthodox ideas about *gender roles*, inequity, caste discrimination, corruption and power abuse” (138). She praises feminist scholars who have “developed ‘outlaw emotions’ that afford them the unique opportunity to create alternative epistemologies” (141). What are “outlaw emotions”? Are these impulses “outlawed” by Scripture, i.e., ones that are condemned by the Law of God? That the author may be suggesting as much finds support in the sexuality on display on pages 144-45. “Outlaw” sexual sin appears to be sanctioned by the author’s remarks about the adulterous Samaritan woman in John 4: “I do not see this woman as one of ill repute nor do I judge her for having five husbands. I celebrate her agency and the role she played in perhaps *opening the eyes of Jesus*.... Living with someone who was not her husband, she transcended barriers of gender and religion and made a space for herself that was characterized by freedom and agency.” Such women “attain new power by renewed transgression” (145).

In this author’s scenario it is not Scripture that opens our eyes to the presence of Jesus. Rather, the roles have been reversed: human sexual “transgression” is so empowering, the transgressor is even able to open “the eyes of Jesus”! Is he the one who is blind? What kind of Christology is presupposed here? Jesus needs to be enlightened by sexual sinners, who are elevated to become revealers of truth. Is this not blasphemy against our Lord?

10. “*The Role of Tradition in Relation to Scripture: Questions and Reflections*”

“The Role of Tradition in Relation to Scripture: Questions and Reflections” (Olson) brings this volume to a close. Thankfully, the perspective returns to being a predominantly Lutheran one, focused on “the tradition of the church catholic” and “the proper relationship of Scripture and church tradition” (154). The author traces the history of the patristic “rule of faith” back to Galatians 6:16. The early church (e.g., Irenaeus) distinguished the rule of faith from Scripture, but both played a similar role for later Christian interpreters. The author follows Pelikan in concluding that “the Christian tradition has retained a remarkable consistency in the midst of its expansions and

rearticulations... over a broad swath of time (centuries and millennia) and of geography (every major region of the world)” (159).

Sola scriptura is to be “understood within a Trinitarian framework. The Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* did not suggest that Scripture should be interpreted apart from any confessional tradition. *Sola scriptura* assumed the use of Christian tradition to guide biblical interpretation.” Moreover, “‘Christ alone’ is the prior principle undergirding ‘Scripture alone’.... Scripture proclaimed in the community of faith is the place where the living Christ encounters the church in the ministry of Word and sacrament” (160-161). Further reflections on Luther’s doctrine of the clarity of Scripture are helpful.

Unfortunately, the final essay ends badly with an appeal (like that of other contributors) for the church to employ hermeneutics that open it up to new (novel) interpretations: “Such a hermeneutic would be both informed by the rich resources of the Christian tradition while at the same time being open to the voice of the living God in Jesus Christ who works through the power of the Holy Spirit to ‘make all things new’ (Rev 21:5)” (168). Biblical eschatology assists here. Revelation 21 is about what happens *after* the *parousia* or return of Christ. At the dawn of the *eschaton*, God will indeed “make all things new”; it is his prerogative! But until then, the church has no such prerogative; we are bound to his Word.

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