

*Enemies of the Cross: Suffering, Truth, and Mysticism in the Early Reformation.* By Vincent Evener. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. xi + 420 pp.

In the last generation the influence of mysticism on the Protestant Reformation has received a good deal of attention. While earlier studies focused on Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt and Thomas Müntzer, often with the goal of showing when and how each man deviated from Martin Luther, more recent work has highlighted the mystical elements in Luther's early theology. Vincent Evener takes a different approach, showing how a theme prominent in late medieval German mysticism influenced the thought of all three reformers. The result is a fresh and fascinating view of the early Reformation in Wittenberg.

Evener argues that all three reformers adopted the annihilation of self-will and rejection of self-trust found in the post-Eckhartian mystical tradition. In doing so, they democratized a central element of late medieval mysticism, making it a necessary part of each Christian's experience. The three men differed, however, in their definition of union with God, which had implications for the Christian's life in the world. For Luther, union with Christ came through faith in God's promise of forgiveness. In contrast, Karlstadt saw union as the soul's sinking into the divine will. Müntzer understood union with God as the result of the soul's emptying itself of created things and being possessed by the Creator, a process that begins with passing through tribulation.

Evener summarizes his argument in the Introduction, and then builds his case carefully in six chapters. The first chapter lays the foundation by tracing the development of the Eckhartian mystical tradition in the writings of Heinrich Suso, John Tauler, and the anonymous author of the *German Theology*. He then looks at the marginal annotations made by both Luther and Karlstadt in their copies of Tauler's sermons, demonstrating that both men harmonized Tauler with Augustine's understanding of the bondage of the will and prevenient grace. The next chapters look at developments in Wittenberg in the early years of the Reformation. Chapter Two examines Luther's 95 *Theses* with their *Explanations* and the

Heidelberg Disputation, showing how Luther's theology of the cross picked up on mystical ideas of self-accusation and salvation as God's work grasped by faith rather than achieved through one's own natural powers. Chapter Three discusses the influence of mystical concepts in the works of both Luther and Karlstadt from 1519 up to 1522, pointing to what would become a significant difference between the two Wittenbergers: while Luther saw union with God as the result of trust amid trials, Karlstadt defined that union as a progressive sinking into the divine will. This difference became more pronounced in Karlstadt's publications from 1522 to 1524, analyzed in Chapter Four. Rather than emphasizing faith, Karlstadt wrote of the knowledge of God and the Christian's self-hatred. Christians were to pursue increased conformity to God's will in a process that would not be completed until after death. In the fifth chapter Evener turns to Thomas Müntzer, who shared with the Wittenbergers the fundamental conviction that Christians must suffer the complete destruction of their own efforts to receive salvation from God. Unlike the Wittenbergers, however, Müntzer saw suffering and tribulation as an initial experience for the elect. Once they had passed through this experience, the elect were possessed by God and able to act as his instruments against the godless. The final chapter brings together all three reformers. How to discern true from false suffering was an important concern for all three, for each regarded his own understanding of suffering as true and as attesting to the truth of his own teaching. Equally important are the corollaries for the Christian life each drew from his understanding of union with God through suffering, whether passive acceptance of suffering within daily life (Luther), active obedience to God's law as an expression of his will (Karlstadt), or resistance to ungodly rulers (Müntzer).

This brief summary cannot convey the richness of detail in the book. Evener's thematic approach allows him to avoid the Luther-centric approach of much earlier work and to highlight both the agreement among all three reformers regarding the necessity of suffering and the originality of each in their understanding of its consequences. Countering the close association of Karlstadt with Müntzer that goes back to the Wittenberg reformers themselves, Evener underscores the similarities between Karlstadt and Luther

in the opening years of the Reformation as well as the significant differences between Karlstadt and Müntzer after 1523. The sensitive and sophisticated presentation of Karlstadt's theology is one of the book's strongest points. Without denying the validity of other approaches, Evener has brought to the fore a new way of understanding developments in Wittenberg. His book should be required reading for anyone interested in the origins of the Reformation.

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