BOOK REVIEWS

Sola: Christ, Grace, Faith, and Scripture Alone in Martin Luther's Theology. By Volker Leppin. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024. 244 pp.

"*Si Lyra non lyrasset, Lutherus non saltasset*." This sixteenth-century jingle, which humorously linked Martin Luther's "dancing" to the tunes played by Nicholas of Lyra's exegetical approach, could have been the title for this book. Leppin's main premise is that we should no longer starkly distinguish medieval and reformatory thinking in Luther for "there was no abrupt break with the Middle Ages but an incremental transition from the early medieval beginning to the late reformer, never losing all ties to his roots" (187). Yet the title of the book is *Sola*, an allusion to the four "exclusive particles" that came to characterize the novelty of the Reformation: *Solus Christus, Sola gratia, Sola fide, Sola Scriptura*. In an irenic ecumenical spirit, Leppin's approach seeks to avoid sloganeering, seeing instead these concepts as entry points ("shafts") that get us to the late medieval roots of Luther's early theology and thus to a more ecumenical, Catholic-friendly Luther.

The book has seven chapters, all originally published in German between 2017 and 2020. Through stellar scholarship and a detailed scrutiny of Luther's early theology in relation to medieval traditions, the arguments are presented in a fresh and accessible prose that will delight readers. Each *sola* expression is presented against its late medieval background. The book opens with a chapter on the disputes on indulgences, followed by the influence of monastic passion piety (Staupitz) in relation to the principle of *Solus Christus* (ch. 2), Tauler's conception of penance and *Sola gratia* (ch. 3), Luther's mystical background and *Sola fide* (ch. 4), the rise of the norm of *Sola Scriptura* in the context of the Leipzig debate (ch. 5), Luther's pneumatic exegesis (ch. 6), and the medieval and reformatory interpretations of letter and spirit (ch.7).

While all chapters contain valuable insights, the chapters on penance (ch. 3) and on the mystical background for *Sola fide* (ch.4) are

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arguably the most illuminating and compelling. Chapter 3 situates the theological principle of justification within the actual penitential practices to which most late-medieval persons were exposed, providing an existential context for abstract theological formulations. In chapter 4 Leppin rightly rescues the profound mystical influence in Luther's Christology and conception of faith, implicitly questioning the more insipid forensic interpretation that later came to characterize the Reformation. The Finns would be happy, and so am I.

Leppin's overall approach is not new. Anchoring both Luther and the Reformation in late medieval Catholic traditions has been common since at least the Roman Catholics Joseph Lortz, Karl Adam, and Erwin Iserloh, besides the more recent contributions of authors such as Oberman, Pelikan, Lienhard, Kung, Pesch, McGinn, Rex, and Gregory. Leppin joins a vast cloud of scholars who have taught us to read Luther in his context, and to acknowledge continuities with the larger Catholic tradition. The very success of these approaches makes the claim about Luther's Catholic roots rather obvious today. The merit of Leppin's work is the detailed documentation of these medieval traditions, which require not only an expertise in the ins and outs of the *Weimarer Ausgabe*, but also a profound knowledge of the voluminous medieval literature and sources.

Leppin's gradualist approach to the development of Luther's theological emphases naturally rejects the excessive lionizing of Luther and the Reformation. Yet the question arises: does a more gradualist approach *à la* Leppin really help in understanding the radical "change of paradigm" brought by Luther and the Reformation? Leppin's approach in this book should be complemented with an articulation of how these medieval traditions (monastic, mystical), authors (Augustine, Lombard, Bernard, Tauler), mentors (Staupitz), and spiritual trends (critique of indulgences, passion piety) eventually coalesce around a Luther embedded in a particular world in order to spawn what others—Catholics like Kung and Tracy—have denominated a "paradigm shift." Luther's theology cannot just be grasped through the lens of gradualism, but should be seen through that of *emergence*—a new configuration which could not be anticipated by just looking at what preceded. I agree with Leppin that the chasing of the reformatory "breakthrough" in the early Luther

obfuscates the matter. On the other hand, an account must be given as to how the "gradual" development of previous traditions, topics and emphases eventually led to a new "framing" though which previous themes (such as Christ, faith, grace, scriptures, and even God) acquired new meanings. The composition and shape of a new frame is what exercises the semantic constraints on previous images, memes, and concepts, resulting in the abandonment of former patterns of thinking and practices. Although Leppin's ecumenical concerns are commendable, I wonder if this disposition does not also retroactively slacken the *accelerando* factors present in Luther, which led to a major reformulation of Christianity—in the same way that Trent, the Second Helvetic Confession, or the Radical Reformation represent other versions of it.

Overall, this is a very sound piece of "genealogical" scholarship, and readers will gain deep insights into the background of Luther's thought. Reformation and Luther research scholars will greatly appreciate this work, as will those engaged in ecumenical studies.

Luther Seminary Guillermo Hansen
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Becoming Lutheran: The Community of Brunswick from Evangelical Reform to Lutheran Culture. By John A. Maxfield. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2024. 394 pp.

John Maxfield unpacks the urban reform of Braunschweig, or, better, Brunswick (not to be confused with the Braunschweig duchies). "Brunswick" is closer to its Low German name. This city merits interest because it achieved a large measure of self-governance, although it never became a free imperial city. Despite the opposition of the Roman Catholic Duke Heinrich the Younger of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (*Hans Wurst*) and others, a popular and spontaneous Lutheran reformation occurred in Brunswick after 1525.

Maxfield is opposed to replacing the Reformation with either a broad Age of Reform stretching back to the Middle Ages or a state absorption of diverging reform theologies into a process of confessionalization that resulted in an Age of Absolutism. Instead he wants

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