

Book Reviews

*Sarah M. Keough, PhD candidate, Boston University,
Boston, Massachusetts*

*Mark Tao, ordained pastor, Evangelical Covenant Church,
Chicago, Illinois*

*Paul Koptak, emeritus professor of communication and biblical
interpretation, North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois*

David W. Swanson, *Rediscovering the White Church: From Cheap Diversity to True Solidarity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 197 pages, \$16.

As I was reading David Swanson's book *Rediscovering the White Church*, protests swept the country following the murder of a black man, George Floyd, by a white police officer. It is disconcerting to read a text that presents hope for racial justice through what Swanson terms "racial discipleship," only to turn on the news and watch buildings burn in a battle cry against systems that continue to oppress and murder black and brown people. In moments like these, racial justice feels elusive. Despite the number of books published on the need for white Christians to care about racial justice, nothing seems to change. People of color continue to suffer under white supremacy and police brutality, while many white Christians are paralyzed by, ignorant of, or actively perpetuating the problem.

Though our present situation may feel overwhelming, it is precisely to this moment that Swanson's book speaks. Swanson argues that white advocates for racial reconciliation have primarily directed their efforts toward multiculturalism and diversity but have failed to address the ways Christian discipleship practices undergird systemic racism. When

the white church fails to address its historical and ongoing complicity in racial violence, white Christians mistakenly believe that racial justice is unrelated or tangential to our spiritual formation. Swanson thus encourages white churches to build anti-racist practices into their ecclesial lives as a matter of Christian discipleship. By understanding the ways biblical teaching and corporate worship affect a white church's ability to combat systemic racism, pastors and leaders can reimagine catechetical and liturgical practices as means of ushering white Christians into solidarity with communities of color.

Swanson's book is primarily directed toward pastors and leaders of predominately white congregations. He discusses the ways table fellowship, preaching, liturgy, and children's ministry can be utilized to educate white congregants on systemic racism and the church's historical entanglement with white supremacy. He argues that education must be paired with a commitment to one's community and location—a difficult feat considering white Christians' propensity for transience. Swanson offers practical suggestions for ways leaders can encourage white congregants to commit to their communities, including learning about the racial history of their churches and cities. As a white community learns its history and commits to changing its narrative from complacency to solidarity, new possibilities for racial reconciliation and justice are birthed.

Swanson argues that as white churches are discipled to challenge white supremacy and practice solidarity with people of color, greater potential exists for healthy relationships between these communities. Pastors and leaders of white churches are exhorted to consider how they might facilitate relationships and dialogue across racial lines. Suggestions include congregations attending a rally for racial justice after church, regularly inviting speakers of color to preach on Sundays, and planning monthly gatherings or potlucks with racially diverse congregations. Swanson states adamantly that Christian leaders cannot participate in the work of racial justice without establishing relationships with leaders of color. Because white people are often blind to their own complicity and biases, relationships of honesty and trust with Christian leaders of color are necessary to ensure that white pastors are not doing more harm than good. Developing relationships across racial lines is not only necessary in the fight for justice; it is also a Christian imperative. If God's heart is for racial reconciliation, love, and compassion between God's people, then the work of racial justice can never be separated from the call to genuine relationship.

While Swanson takes great care to emphasize the necessity of relationships with people of color alongside education and activism, readers should ensure they are educating themselves regarding the ways their racial justice efforts may inadvertently fatigue people of color. Studies have shown that, despite their genuine commitment to the cause of racial justice, white activists often increase burnout rates among activists of color. Readers should supplement Swanson's book with titles that further explore this issue, such as Austin Channing Brown's *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* and Jennifer Harvey's *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation*. Overall, Swanson's book advances conversations regarding white ecclesial engagement in racial justice work and provides useful strategies for how white congregations can begin this journey.

SARAH M. KEOUGH

Mae Elise Cannon and Andrea Smith, eds., *Evangelical Theologies of Liberation and Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 376 pages, \$36.

In a day where the term “evangelical” is often associated with a lack of social concern, might an evangelical theology alternately advance social liberation and justice? In this volume, editors Mae Cannon and Andrea Smith argue yes, claiming that an evangelical theology par excellence prioritizes the liberation of the oppressed. They suggest that Evangelicalism need not be bound by logics that exclude those on the margins of society. Rather, an evangelical identity is deeply informed by both the liberation priorities of diverse ecclesial traditions and subsequent “justice-rooted liberation praxis” (p. xi).

The chapters of this edited volume are organized into five sections. Section I opens with a consideration of liberation methodology. Paul Louis Metzger establishes a “centered-set” model, challenging evangelical methodologies that overly police boundaries of belonging. Soong-Chan Rah names evangelical captivity to the exceptionalism and triumphalism of colonial patriarchy, and Chanequa Walker-Barnes grieves the exclusion of black and womanist traditions in evangelical discourses. Section II argues that the origins of evangelicalism may be located in what Robert Chao Romero calls “Brown Theology” and, more specifically, as Alexia Salvatierra aptly demonstrates, with Latin American *evangélicos* who imagined a holistic gospel that fused commitments of social and familial

justice to biblicism and christocentric activism.

Section III shifts to evangelical outlooks on sin and soteriology as mediated through collectivist and structural orientations. Here readers are privileged to hear from Andrea Smith, Sarah Withrow King, J. Nicole Morgan, and Terry and Jeanine LeBlanc as they enumerate such understandings through indigenous, ecological, and body-positive lenses. Section IV highlights contemporary evangelical movements with liberation at the center of theology and praxis. Of particular note here are the Center for Urban Ministerial Education at Gordon-Conwell Seminary and the specific legacy of CUME's first director, Eldin Villafane; Shudra and Dalit contexts; and Black and Palestinian traditions as presented by Peter Heltzel, Pablo Jiménez, and Emmett Price III, Boaz Johnson, and Mae Cannon respectively. Section V examines subjects of liberation, such as the Bible itself with Drew Hart's work on Barabbas, global Pentecostalism with Amos Yong, and sacramental theology with Dominique Gilliard. Hart, Yong, and Gilliard then discuss how each treatment may be instructive for deeper evangelical consideration.

In presenting this work, the editors and authors have made a significant statement about the possibility of Evangelicalism to speak truth and advance justice—not merely as a matter of borrowed activism of other justice traditions but as an act of integrity unto itself. This message comes at a timely moment, as the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor have again put US evangelicals to the test. Must evangelical traditions be known for complicity in anti-blackness, defenses of racial violence, and white normativity? Or can they forge a different path, one that unequivocally rejects anti-blackness and embodies anti-racist praxis?

Though there is precious little to critique about this already superb volume, it might have been further enhanced by expansions in a few areas, for instance, attending in section III to how an evangelical theology of liberation might reformulate conventional understandings of Christology, the cross, or biblicism, alongside the book's existing focus on rethinking sin, soteriology, and conversionism. Here venturing deeper into concepts such as a Neplanta Christology or Wang Weifan's cosmic Christ or delving into postcolonial evangelical hermeneutics might have proven fruitful. Further, featuring and interacting with more expressions of world Evangelicalism in Part IV, would have been welcome. Here movements come to mind such as the evangelical house church movement in China, the Cambodian evangelical Ratanak Ministry working to combat sex trafficking, or the interfaith justice work of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services in Egypt. (See, for example,

Mark Noll, “World Cup or World Series?” in *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be.*)

Throughout the volume, further attention might have also been given to the interrelation between evangelical liberation praxis, disability, and queer advocacy. The tragedies of ableism and transphobias are briefly mentioned, but the volume largely omits questions regarding how queer theology might coexist with evangelical theologies of liberation. The late theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid and Brazilian evangelical churches like Igreja Cristã Contemporânea or Comunidade Cidade de Refúgio embody such coexistence. If evangelical theologies are to be truly liberative, one must also inquire whether they must be truly intersectional—and, correspondingly, whether they can be truly intersectional if they are not willing to critique heteronormativity along with colonialism, hyper-capitalism, patriarchy, and nativism.

In the end, this book largely succeeds in much of what it sets out to do, namely, reworking the “evangelical” frame to be more broadly inclusive, especially of liberation priorities that elevate attention to oppressed communities. It also aptly showcases many existing schools of evangelical liberation praxis. One is left to wonder, however, whether the very traditions, movements, and communities the authors describe as inclusive to Evangelicalism would themselves be amenable to such a classification. Moreover, the question remains whether the vision of such a volume will prove convincing to evangelicals firmly committed to a more bounded Evangelicalism. In any case, all pastors and practitioners should purchase and critically engage this important text. The future of evangelical flourishing in our world may well depend on it.

MARK TAO

Walter Brueggemann, *Preaching from the Old Testament*, Working Preacher Books (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019), 250 pages, \$19.

This first book in the Working Preacher series is also the last book Walter Brueggemann says he will write. While that is not happy news for his readers, it is good to see that he has directed his attention once more to preaching, following on *Finally Comes the Poet* (1989) and *Cadences of Home* (1997). In one sense, all of Brueggemann’s writing has had that focus. In his 1990 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, he claimed that the biblical text “is inherently agonistic and makes its advocacy in the face of other advocacies.”¹ As such, he con-

cluded, biblical scholarship can be neither objective nor neutral.

Now he reminds preachers that they enter into that same conflict with a redemptive purpose: “It is the conviction of the preacher and the hope of the church that there is a better narrative. . . . Under good preaching, we are always again invited into the counter narrative that refuses the death sentence we love too much” (p. 40).

Although Brueggemann chooses not to use the schemes of law-gospel or salvation history, he is committed to reading texts in their canonical contexts. References to Genesis made by Moses, Isaiah, Ezra, and Luke all figure into his reading of an alternative story rehearsed in the face of distorted desire, violence, and empire: Babylon and Persia then, consumer market ideology now. Blessing and curse run throughout Genesis, along with the tension of being both recipient and carrier of blessedness, of being chosen and sharing the blessing with the world.

A chapter on “the Moses tales” of Exodus opens with five pages on the Pharaoh who never has enough and his food czar, Joseph the sellout. The liberation and wilderness wandering present a stark picture that must not be sentimentalized. “The preacher’s task is to be honest about the risky terrain of departure and discipleship. And then to tell this amazing story of flourishing life given outside of Pharaoh’s totalism. It is inexplicable and unexpected” (p. 51).

However, such preaching is not easy; ask any pastor who has been told to stick with what is spiritual and leave politics (or any social concern) alone. To attend to the prophetic texts is to observe that attempt at silencing (think of Elijah, Amos, Jeremiah). Therefore, Brueggemann claims that prophets say what those in power want to keep unsaid; “prophets *utter the unutterable*” (p. 75). He inserts a number of examples to let the poetry have its say, setting those texts into Jeremiah’s “mantra” of judgment (“to pluck up and tear down”) and hope (“to plant and build”).

Preaching from the Psalms helps Christians and congregations find a framework for expressions of sorrow and joy in their life stories. After showing how psalms allow for that “performance of emotional extremity” (p. 125), Brueggemann presents his classic framework of *orientation, disorientation, reorientation*. Few psalms display the entire pattern: some voice the order of orientation, others the pain of disorientation, and still others the elation of living in newness. This master plot allows the

¹ Walter Brueggemann, “At the Mercy of Babylon: A Subversive Rereading of the Empire,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110, no. 1 (1991): 20.

preacher to select a psalm and ask which part of life is addressed and for whom.

The rest of the writings (*ketuvim*) are represented by the wisdom books. Proverbs presents an orientation of moral clarity but not certainty, where actions have predictable but not guaranteed outcomes. A number of proverbs (Proverbs 16:1–2; 19:21; 20:24; 21:30–31) speak to the inscrutability of creation and its God. Job follows one man through the psalmic process of disorientation and reorientation. The preacher is privileged and called to sit with the Jobs in her congregation and offer space for lament. Ecclesiastes weighs its world-weariness against the benefits of wisdom, small joys of living, and fear of God. Each book in turn represents a greater willingness to engage the unpredictable and vulnerable life of faith.

In reading this book I had the sense of sitting in Brueggemann's Old Testament classes, hearing his many asides for those learning to preach. "The preacher knows that these thick texts never 'meant' in any original way. Rather, they always 'mean,' present tense" (p. 26). Each of the five chapters will challenge some view the reader holds dear, and this alone makes this compendium of Brueggemann's scholarship and teaching important reading.

PAUL KOPTAK