

## Book Reviews

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*Jared S. Burkholder, Professor of History,  
Grace College, Winona Lake, Indiana*

*Armida Belmonte Stephens, Theology Teaching Fellow,  
North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois*

*Michael O. Emerson, Professor and Department Head of Sociology,  
University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois*

*Joy-Elizabeth Lawrence, Associate Pastor of Spiritual Formation,  
Hinsdale Covenant Church, Hinsdale, Illinois*

**Jonathan M. Wilson, *God on Three Sides: German Pietists at War in Eighteenth-Century America* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019), 312 pages, \$38.**

In *God on Three Sides: German Pietists at War in Eighteenth-Century America*, Jonathan M. Wilson describes the diverse experiences of Pietists during the colonial and revolutionary eras from his perspective as both a historian and a pastor. This study, he believes, is an opportunity to test the “axiom” that one’s religious identity predicts one’s political loyalties. The axiom, he concludes, however often it may be used, is patently false.

After contextualizing the narrative in chapter 1, Wilson offers snapshots of various people, historical situations, and religious communities, all of which illuminate the experiences of Pietists as they navigated a turbulent world. Chapter 2 spotlights the meandering career of Conrad Weiser, the colonial interpreter and political mediator who experimented with Pietist spirituality. Weiser’s life serves as a window into the complex

world of frontier politics and the messy landscape inhabited by many of Pennsylvania's Pietist groups. Chapters 3 and 6 respectively examine members of the Mühlenberg family: Lutheran patriarch Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg, and his son, Peter. The senior Mühlenberg's ministerial career allows Wilson to flesh out the theological tensions that many Christians, Pietist or otherwise, no doubt felt during the period. What was the role of government? Did loyalty to Christ lead to one side of the revolution or the other? How was a minister to serve during such a divisive time? The career of the younger Mühlenberg, also an ordained minister, likewise illustrates these shifting tensions—dramatically embodied in his decision to shed his ministerial garb for an officer's uniform in the patriot army. Fittingly, the Moravians also figure prominently. Two chapters are devoted to these Pietists and their settlement at Bethlehem. Like the Mühlenbergs' careers, the experiences of Moravians help accentuate the dilemma that German Pietists felt. Moravians were heavily invested in mission work on the North American frontier, which put them in a politically difficult situation. Few felt this more than missionary and linguist David Zeisberger, whom Wilson spotlights in chapter 7. Moravian missionaries, determined as they were to love both friends and enemies, worked hard to remain neutral amidst the political unrest and despite the acts of violence perpetrated against them. Moravians were unique in the fact that they had strict pacifists among their ranks, such as Bishop Johann Ettwein, as well as realists like Bishop August Spangenberg, who allowed for limited militarization in the service of self-defense. This is explored in chapter 4.

While much of what is described above is known well, Wilson includes two lesser-known figures in his study: Friedrich Valentin Melsheimer, described in chapter 5, and Christoph Friedrich Triebner, the focus of chapter 8. The life of Melsheimer, who began his career in North America as a chaplain to German auxiliary forces under British command and finished it as a Lutheran minister in the new American nation, is a fascinating account that illustrates the way Christian piety transcends temporal political alignment. Equally fascinating is the career of Triebner, who was sent to the Ebenezer settlement in Georgia from the Pietist center at Halle, endured controversy and false accusations, served as a Lutheran minister under British occupational forces, and finished his career serving German speakers in London. All the strands in this tapestry, Wilson believes, not only illustrate the diverse political convictions among Pietists but also demonstrate that God was present and active among Christians on each

of the three political “sides”—patriot, loyalist, and neutral.

If our evaluation of this book were limited only to its contributions to the field of historical understanding, then we may say that it lacks a significant measure of originality. That the American Revolution fractured the religious landscape of colonial America, tested religious communities, and even divided devout families is familiar—even well-worn—territory. The messy realities of war and violence have been probed by any number of denominational histories and journals. Though Wilson has made use of many of these, as his citations attest, this study largely fails to move the conversation into new areas of interpretation. Some of this might have been achieved by more thoroughly plumbing extant manuscript collections, such as those still housed at the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The author seems to have been most concerned about original research in the sections devoted to Melsheimer and Triebner, but less so throughout the rest of the book, relying heavily on dated treatments such as those by Wallace (*Weiser and the Mühlenbergs*) or Hamilton (*Moravians*), to give two examples. This illustrates what seems to be Wilson’s reliance on published sources instead of original archival work.

If, however, we consider other factors, the strengths of this study are readily apparent. Wilson successfully brings a cautionary tale for his contemporary readers, which allows us to see the author’s pastoral sensibilities. While it is easy to make assumptions about people based purely on religious categories or denominational affiliation, clusters of like-minded believers can exhibit considerable political diversity. This pastoral message is especially relevant for our age, Wilson contends, as categories have become laden with political baggage—just as the word “evangelical” has become almost synonymous with support for Trumpian partisanship in the popular imagination. “This has implications,” he says, “for those who find it convenient to tar all evangelicals with broad strokes, and it has implications for those evangelicals . . . who find those broad strokes convenient for their own purposes” (p. 5). Labels, after all, gloss over nuance and obscure differences in our time, just as they did for the eighteenth-century “proto-evangelicals” in this study. Wilson effectively draws out this lesson in the conclusion:

These ethnic German Pietists and their indigenous prose-lytes together manifest the paradox that through the spiritual power of “heart religion,” God was personally present and active on all sides of America’s partisan struggles in the eighteenth century. The stories of these ethnic German Pietists

collectively are evidence that shared faith does not predict shared agreement on social and political issues...the axiom [that one's religion predicts one's politics] should have no place in popular discourse (p. 283).

Though historians may be left wanting more original analysis within the pages of *God on Three Sides*, lay readers will find a fascinating tapestry of narratives that illuminate individuals and communities as they navigated the spiritual and political landscape they inhabited. Readers will also find challenging words that can be carried into our current era of ongoing culture wars.

JARED S. BURKHOLDER

**Dennis R. Edwards, *Might from the Margins: The Gospel's Power to Turn the Tables on Injustice* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2020), 198 pages, \$17.**

If you are a Christian and a person of color, this book was written with you in mind. A New Testament scholar and a pastor, Dennis Edwards has gifted us with a book that centers people of color. He identifies the dual needs of resisting the lies that people of color encounter by virtue of living in a racialized society, while also providing a constructive and hopeful message from which to build. To those at the margins of society, Edwards proclaims that they do not need the permission or empowerment of dominant-culture Christians to live out their faith because they already possess the power of the gospel of God.

Edwards weaves Scripture and experience throughout his book, beginning with a call to a biblical understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He urges his readers to remember that the gospel of Jesus is not good news if it is not good news for *everyone*. The gospel of Jesus—his life, death, burial, and resurrection—has something to say to marginalized peoples everywhere and is the power of God to bring change in the world. Rather than being “reduced to a set of ideas,” the gospel is the story of the Jewish Jesus that includes his life, teaching, and ministry. A community faithful to Scripture not only proclaims the good news of liberation from sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus, but it also embodies this truth.

Marginalized people are uniquely situated to embody the gospel and to teach us how to follow Christ. Christians who are presumed to be

powerless in society—people of color, women, and people who are differently abled, to name only a few examples—are in fact those whom God has empowered to act as agents of transformation for the Church: “We don’t just change the complexion of Christianity; we change its operation” (20).

Diaspora Christians have a history of demonstrating resilience and of effectively resisting injustice through nonviolent means. God works through the so-called prophets from “the bottom” of society who are often ignored but are faithful messengers against powerful and oppressive structures. The lives of trailblazers such as Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., and Ida B. Wells attest to the reality that prophetic figures are anything but warmly embraced by those in positions of power and are easily dismissed because they are perceived as “too angry.”

While warning that not all anger is redemptive, Edwards validates anger as an appropriate response in the face of injustice. Expounding on Ephesians 4, he notes that the right and wise response to anger is to use its power to address its cause and to prevent further damage. There is also power in solidarity when Christians at the margins unite to embody the gospel—imitating Christ who also was marginalized—as they collectively live and work together. Because worship is a reorientation of our values, it is a way of life, a witness to the work of God in the world, and is reflected when followers of Jesus gather. Black spirituals show the power of worship to protest and subvert the status quo. Through spirituals, enslaved Christians found a way to express their grief and hopes, and to affirm what W.E.B. Du Bois called a “faith in the ultimate justice of things” (127). In these and other ways, people of faith are empowered with God’s spiritual resources for faithful and hope-filled lives characterized by a love that is both patient and just.

Edwards’s book is a timely and needed resource for Christians of color who have in many ways felt ignored or overlooked by the North American Church. It comes at a time when our country is marked by deep divisions due to racial tensions and hate crimes and Christianity is in some spheres indistinguishable from Christian nationalism.

We need and benefit from Edwards’s direct and plainspoken truth-telling today, yet the book may come with challenges for some, perhaps most, white readers. It is unapologetic about the right that Christians at the margins of society have to contribute to Christianity and shape it for the future without having to ask for permission from majority-culture Christians. This can be a disequilibrating truth for some who will have

to rethink their relationship with minoritized people—shifting from “empowering others” to listening to and taking their cues from them (48).

This book centers, and is written to, Christians of color, but it is also *for* all pastors, seminary students, and church lay leaders alike. It is an excellent example of a resource that is sensitive to the needs and perspectives of Christians of color in the United States. Majority-culture readers who serve or minister to marginalized communities can find in its pages a gospel message that is both relevant and hopeful to those who contend daily with realities that devalue or disempower them.

I recommend *Might from the Margins* wholeheartedly and without reservation, taking special note from Edwards that “[w]e become better humans when we heed the prophets that God graciously sends our way. Even though their words might sting those with prestige and power, they can also be a balm for the suffering” (83). May it be so.

ARMIDA BELMONTE STEPHENS

**Beth Seversen, *Not Done Yet: Reaching and Keeping Unchurched Emerging Adults* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 256 pages, \$18**

**W**e are called to grow God’s family, to build God’s kingdom. As American society secularizes, we face an increasing challenge in reaching the unchurched. Studies show that if unchurched people are going to convert to a committed life following Jesus, it will likely happen during their young adult years. Yet, churches have been increasingly struggling to reach this large, essential population.

Enter *Not Done Yet*, by Beth Seversen. If I could make it so, I would require every church in the nation to read this book and work to implement its wisdom.

Most churches are anemic in reaching unchurched young adults (those aged 18-29), though some buck the trend. Seversen calls these congregations “bright spot churches” and explores what they are doing that succeeds in attracting and retaining this population.

Young adults of today are different than past generations. They take much longer to adopt an overall identity viewing it as something akin to shopping for the right fitting clothes. They may try on many different styles to find the best fit. They often view the Church as judgmental and out of touch, and they are often more drawn to belonging and doing good than to believing.

Bright spot churches adapt to this reality by doing the following: 1) They actively *initiate* relationships with the unchurched (most churches fall short at this step, as their members overwhelmingly spend their relationship time with fellow believers). 2) They intentionally *invite* their friends to attend church, often by talking about the great things happening there or by emphasizing that they need not have a particular set of beliefs to attend. 3) They prepare to *include* young adults so that when unchurched people do visit, bright spot churches have prepared a way for faith to take root by welcoming the guests warmly and without judgment, demonstrating a family-like atmosphere. 4) They *involve* the young adults in the life of the body through serving the larger community. 5) They *invest* in the young people through mentoring, counseling, coaching, and leadership development.

Seversen stresses that bright spot churches do something else vitally important: they take these steps *immediately*, not waiting weeks or months. Such churches understand that the path to belief in, and commitment to, Christ is, for this population, first through belonging to something bigger than themselves and then engaging in actions to serve the larger community (e.g., racial and economic justice, reducing hunger). Bright spot churches know these steps must be done immediately. Through belonging and behavior, belief and commitment will eventually come over time. This is “within-church” evangelism, the most effective form for our contemporary times.

Wonderfully researched, this book is written with churches in mind—churches that want to reach unchurched young adults. Each chapter concludes with a short, helpful summary, a section called “Starting the Conversation,” which allows your church body to explore where it is on the topic, and “Action Steps” that offer clear, practical means to move forward.

I cannot help but reflect on a possible paradox. Young adults—especially those who are unchurched—are in many ways relativistic (Seversen shares a story of teaching Bible class at North Park, discussing the biblical conception of sin, and a student commenting, “Isn’t sin just a social construction?”), yet they are at the same time fundamentalist on some issues (there is no right or wrong in sexual mores, for example, and those who hold a different view are bigots).

This raises an interesting and important tension point in reaching unchurched young adults, and a tension point flowing through many congregations: does belief matter at all? As the larger culture dictates to

churches what is acceptable, must churches fully adapt and adopt? What if unchurched young people actively belong and participate, but never actually believe and commit to Christ and Christ-like lives? Are there any limits to their involvement in the church?

These are issues churches must wrestle with, even as we work to reach the unchurched in an ever-changing world. To do that, we need *Not Done Yet*.

MICHAEL O. EMERSON

**Sandra L. Richter, *Stewards of Eden: What Scripture Says About the Environment and Why It Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 168 pages, \$22.**

I remember when I realized the magnitude of our world's environmental crisis. It dovetailed with one of the most celebratory times of life, marriage. In the midst of a celebration was the packaging. Piles and piles of plastic and nonrecyclable Styrofoam. I began to receive gifts with a sadness weighing down my newlywed joy. "What are we doing to God's world?" I wondered, as we set up a kitchen full of new appliances while the boxes stacked up in the hall.

This conviction I experienced twenty years ago has continued to guide my thoughts and choices about the environment today. "Is this good for the earth?" is a question I frequently ask, and one I've taught my children to ask. My care for the earth comes not out of a panentheistic theology, but from a Christian theology that affirms: "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Ps 24:1, NIV).

It's with this conviction that I was delighted to pick up Sandra L. Richter's short biblical theology on creation care, *Stewards of Eden*, because she demonstrates why caring for God's creation is an ongoing biblical mandate.

Richter is clear about her reasons for writing this volume. First, she invites Christians to disassociate environmental concern from political partisanship. Second, she encourages Christians to include creation care with our concern for justice, especially for the poor and marginalized. Finally, Richter critiques the commonly held Christian belief that care for souls, especially a conversion-centric soul care, should be the only priority for the church, as the rest is "bound only for destruction" (3). Richter disagrees with this presumption, noting: "The church, particularly the evangelical wing of the church, has inadvertently dismissed the

issue of environmental stewardship as peripheral (or even alien) to the theological commitments of the Bible” (3).

Richter uses the rest of the book to unpack this statement. As one might expect, she begins with the creation narratives (Gen 1-2; Ps 8). But she rapidly turns to lesser-emphasized texts, spending chapter 2 examining the nation of Israel’s call to stewardship. She emphasizes the biblical teaching that Israel is not the “owner” of Canaan, but simply the tenants. “In the language of ancient international diplomacy, the land of Canaan was ... a ‘land grant’ given by a suzerain to his vassal. And, of course, land grants could be recalled” (16).

Richter also explores the call to care for domestic and wild animals and trees. She emphasizes the commandment for a Sabbath rest for domestic animals (Deut 5:14-15), and the celebration of wild animals throughout Scripture (Ps 104; Job 28). She also highlights Deut 20:19, which instructs the warring Israelites not to destroy fruit trees in order to build siege works. This law allows people to benefit long-term from fruit planted generations before them. Creation care is long-term generational work.

Each chapter concludes with contemporary case studies, demonstrating crises that have been exacerbated, at least in part, by humanity disobeying creation care guidance in Scripture. These include: systemic land overuse, the economic unviability of small family farms, loss of habitat for endangered indigenous species, mountaintop removal coal mining, and long-term effects of war on local environments.

Richter ends the book by addressing her primary concern of prioritizing saving souls over saving the planet. She addresses this by discussing New Testament passages (including 2 Pet 3:10-13 and 1 Thess 5:2-3) and then rehearsing God’s mission: “The goal has always been God’s people living in God’s place with full access to his presence” (98). This is why we care for souls through invitation to find and follow Jesus Christ. And this is also why we are called to actively care for creation. These are tandem calls.

As Christians who care about God’s creation, we can be ambassadors of hope to secular environmentalists. I’m reminded of environmental activist David Buckel, who died by suicide in order to call attention to pollution and climate change. What if Christians in this life demonstrated care for God’s world while providing eternal hope in the promises and purposes of God?

As Covenanters, we can receive this guidance from Richter with joy. We affirm the whole mission of the church. We believe that the mission of

creation care is linked to the Great Commandment, to mercy and justice for our fellow human beings, and to mercy and justice for the created order we are called to steward. This is a great book for a local church book club or an adult discipleship/formation class. It has discussion questions at the end of each chapter and is short and accessible.

JOY-ELIZABETH LAWRENCE

