Book Redux

Gene Edward Veith, Jr. and Trevor Sutton. *Authentic Christianity: How Lutheran Theology Speaks to a Postmodern World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 232 pp. $15.99

Reviewed by M. Anthony Seel

To a world of "relativists," "subjectivists" (12), burned-out and disaffected believers, and spiritual secularists, who are also identified as the "spiritual but not religious" (29), authors Veith and Sutton offer Lutheranism as the most authentic form of Christian faith.

Veith and Sutton open with a history lesson that takes the reader through the premodern and modern worlds and into the contemporary situation of postmodernism. In doing so, they utilize Wesleyan theologian Thomas Oden as a tour guide (13-14). Oden dates the beginning of the modern era to the fall of the Bastille on July 14, 1789. The French Revolution ushered in this new period by murdering the French royalty, eviscerating ancient traditions, and using a new calendar to restart history. The Age of Reason was thereby born, and rationality replaced Christianity, which was seen as a vestige of the old worldview replete with revelation and miracles. The "empirical rationalism of the scientific revolution" flourished in the nineteenth century as an extension of the Enlightenment period of the previous century. From this came "progressive politics" expressed in various ideologies: "populism, socialism, social democracy, communism, and more" (14). As a result, society created "modern art, modern poetry, modern architecture, modern design, and, most important, modern theology" (14).

Oden dates the end of the modern era as the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. That gives the modern era 200 years of duration. Postmodernism effectively started in the 1960s as a response to the Vietnam War and "technocratic society" (17). The authors observe that "objective rationalism gave way to subjective irrationalism…. A new awareness of various cultures, prompted by a rise in immigration and American diversity, manifested itself in multiculturalism and then cultural relativism" (17). A burgeoning outcome of postmodernist thinking came in the form of virtual reality, which entered through "personal computers, the internet, smartphones, and video games" and led to "virtual identities, virtual social networks, and virtual relationships" (17).

Intellectuals like Jacques Derrida posited deconstructionism, which Michel Foucault developed into a way of understanding that reduces culture, including "literature, history, philosophy, law, the social sciences, education, [and] theology," to "power politics" whereby oppressors use the power they have to control others (17). Oden identifies postmodernism as "hypermodernism" and sees its antidote as "rediscovering historic orthodox Christianity" (20). Just as postmoderns borrowed elements from the past in architecture, film, urban planning, and environmentalism, Christians can do so as well by drawing from the best of our tradition and bringing it into our lives today. Lutheranism, as it transitioned from the Renaissance to the Reformation, can point the way by providing plausible responses to the issues raised by postmodernism.

The authors begin their Lutheran response to postmodernism with a look at a person whom Kierkegaard and Goethe held in the highest esteem, Johann Georg Hamann. Hamann, a neighbor of Immanuel Kant, strongly critiqued Kant's work. He argued for the relevance of revelation in an age that, in the name of reason, had turned away from revelation. Theologian John Betz ranks Hamann against Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida as one who leads us forward rather than into the dead end of nihilism offered by the other three. Betz states:

> Anticipating the collapse of secular reason, Hamann thus brings us to a decidedly postmodern crossroads, at which point one can take the road of faith, which, as an inspired tradition attests, leads to ever greater enlightenment; or one can take the road of postmodern unbelief, which leads to nihilism. Simply put, the alternative is one between Hamann and postmodernity (27).

Professor Ted Kinnaman of George Mason University further references some of the scholarly engagement with Hamann. Kinnaman calls Hamann "the philosophically most sophisticated thinker of the German Counter-enlightenment" (28). However, Veith and Sutton describe Hamann's work as "little more than ordinary Lutheranism" (28). They contend that "Hamann's critique of Enlightenment rationalism differs little from Luther's critique of Christian rationalism" (28).

Luther combatted medieval scholasticism on the same grounds that Hamann critiqued Enlightenment rationalism—he recognized the limits to human reason and elevated God's Word and Christian faith as providing the answers to human questions and dilemmas. From this perspective, Veith and Sutton drill down into worldviews: "Contemporary culture consists largely of people who believe truth is relative, that they can choose their own morality, that life has no particular meaning" (29). There are still "modernists who believe that the material world is all there is and that the only reality is what science can prove" (29). There are also the postmodernists who are "spiritual but not religious" (29). Both positions are "essentially godless" (29).

> It may be that Lutheranism is an articulation of Christianity that can reach relativists, secularists, the spiritual but not religious, those who cannot so much as conceive of God, those who try to turn themselves into God, and other products and casualties of contemporary culture (31).

The authors suggest that what may be needed is "another Reformation" (33). They observe that "Contemporary churches seem adrift, confused, and dysfunctional, ill-equipped for the challenges of secularism, postmodernism, and cultural change" (33). In 2024, *Christianity Today* published "The Six Way Fracturing of Evangelicalism" on their blog, *Mere Orthodoxy*.[1] In that article, writer Michael Graham highlights some of the ways that evangelicalism has been torn apart by events that have revealed divisions within American evangelicalism based on socioeconomic, political, and cultural forces that in practice supersede theological differences. This is a result of the drift, confusion, and dysfunction highlighted by Veith and Sutton.

Graham returned to this topic a year later in the pages of *Christianity Today* with co-author Skylar Flowers. Their article "A Splintered Generation" demonstrates the ways that evangelicalism has fractured along sociological, political, and cultural differences. One divide is by gender. They write that "Regardless of the underlying causes, the widening gaps between young men and young women in politics, religious belief, and religious attendance will play a significant role in the contours of the fracturing of evangelicalism."[2]

How can the evangelical church restore some semblance of unity, clarity, and faithfulness to the God who is the Word and who gave us the revelation contained in Scriptures? As the authors recognize, the American church has tried the "seeker-sensitive" approach that grew out of the Church Growth Movement with some success, alongside highly apparent weaknesses. They cite three book-length critiques of this approach and look at the Emerging Church approach, note its successes, and point to its deficiencies. Their thesis maintains that "We need a different framework. We need a better framework. We need a framework that … can engage the thirty-three million people who are spiritual but not religious" (40).

Veith and Sutton "Imagine a Christianity of Christianities … that is markedly better than the Church Growth or Emerging Church Movements" (41-42). That approach is Lutheran Christianity as a bridge between the sacramental Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches and biblical and evangelical Protestant churches. In its confessional form, Lutheranism is sacramental while also being biblical and evangelical. As they show, the Lutheran bridge is much different than the Anglican bridge that accommodates a wide range of beliefs. The Lutheran Book of Concord anchors the Lutheran understanding of the Bible in ways that the Anglican Articles of Religion do not. As Veith and Sutton say, there is a precision to Lutheran theology that is lacking in Anglicanism.

This leads to the question of how Lutheran Christianity might "spark a Reformation for the twenty-first century as it did five hundred years ago" (50). Veith and Sutton explain that they will consider the "major issues facing the contemporary church" and demonstrate how "Lutheran Christianity addresses them" (56). Beginning with "partial truths human beings are able to grasp by themselves" about God, the authors see two tendencies in American secular society. While 89% of Americans say that they believe in God, according to a Gallup poll in 2016, the God they believe in is either transcendent, distant from us like the Deism of our founding fathers, or immanent, within each of us, not both transcendent and immanent. The authors compare this version of Deism to "a cup of weak decaf coffee that only arouses the desire for something stronger, bolder, and fully caffeinated" (66). The "God within" is not any better. This view of God is traced back to the pietism of John Wesley's Methodism. There are also the non-Christian versions like Hinduism that has morphed into the New Age Movement.

The world in which Martin Luther lived leaned heavily toward the distant God who lives in heaven "in his incomprehensible power, wisdom, and majesty" (73). For Luther, God brings Himself to us in His Son so that "He might present Himself to our sight" (74). Luther says, "Take hold of Him; cling to Him with all your heart, and spurn all speculation about the Divine Majesty..." (75). The emphasis in Lutheran theology on the Word of God, the sacraments, and the church, sees God as actively present in this world, which brings us to the central doctrine of Lutheran theology, justification by faith in Jesus Christ.

Veith and Sutton note that while the theological work of justification may be lost to secular society, justification in other senses is certainly not. Secularists seek to justify themselves through politics and ideologies. The authors assert that there is a human obsession with justification. It is not hard to show that

> even the most hardened secularists, those who reject the very possibility of moral truth, are constantly making moral judgments: they demand social justice, denounce political evils, demonstrate for human rights, call for ethical approaches to the environment, and criticize bad behavior wherever they see it (84).

As contemporary German Lutheran theologian Oswald Bayer has aptly shown, evil and suffering have not exited our world along with the God whom the secularists deny exists. Without God or justification, "life is meaningless, absurd, pointless, and (in a tragic number of cases) not worth living" (87). Faith in Jesus Christ gives life meaning and makes it worth living by giving us a justification that makes sense as it deals with sin, evil, and the sufferings of this world. Jesus Christ answers the deepest needs of humanity (89). In this, the authors point to Luther as "anticipating—and repudiating—the mindset of both the modernist and postmodernist" (91).

The modernist responds, "I can't believe this. It's incomprehensible to reason." The postmodernist responds, "I can't believe this. I didn't construct this by the strength of my will" (92). To modernists and postmodernists, Luther says that the Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel and enlightens us with His gifts (contra modernists and postmodernists) (92).

Considering the source of our justification, Jesus Christ and the cross on which He died, Veith and Sutton take dead aim at the pop psychology of Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuller, which has morphed into the prosperity gospel of Joel Osteen and Word of Faith Pentecostalism. Lutheran theology stands opposed to all theologies of glory. The theology of the cross meets the critique of Christianity leveled by postmodernists that it is "nothing more than a manifestation of power" (110). Almighty God allows suffering, but He also participates in suffering on the cross.

The authors accuse modernists and postmodernists of offering this world theologies of glory. For the modernist, science and technology give us a path of progress toward better lives. Postmodernism gives everyone the authority to construct their own moralities and realities. "The theology of the cross—the message that God comes not in power but in weakness to human beings not in their strength but in their weakness—overturns both modernism and postmodernism" (121).

The question remains how to get beyond the pretensions of the modernists and postmodernists so that they too can embrace the cross of Christ. While Lutheran theology answers questions that non-believers of different stripes are asking, the question remains how to enter into conversation with them. This is the work of evangelism and pre-evangelism, which the authors do not take up. Their next move is to the real presence of God in this world through Jesus Christ in His incarnation and now through the Word of God and the Sacraments. Accordingly, "both in its sacramental theology and elsewhere, Lutheranism offers a theology of presence" (127). This flies in the face of the modernists and postmodernists who "often assume that the physical world is all there is" (127). Many issues come into play because of this:

> Today, the religious, the spiritual but not religious, and even the materialists who believe the physical realm is all there is, are often alienated from the real tangible world and from their own bodies. This is only intensified by our information technology, with its virtual realities, virtual identities, and virtual environments. Our "body issues," as they say, are at the root of our other troubles over sex (including the disembodied sex of internet pornography), reproduction (abortion vs. giving birth), and our fear of aging (which we try to reverse with plastic surgery, expensive creams and lotions, and perpetual adolescence) (130).

To this, we can add the body issues of gender identity, so with all this, "the outside reality impinges on our consciousness" (131). We experience suffering that we

cannot control and sometimes joy that points to something beyond ourselves and this world. We cannot live in a value-free world and it is not intellectually honest to dismiss questions about where our values come from in what Lutheran pastor and theologian Michael Lockwood describes as our disenchanted world. Lockwood traces the disenchantment of our world back to a Reformed theology that predated the Enlightenment. They did so through a hermeneutic of transcendence "which 'drew sharp boundaries between matter and spirit and stressed to a high degree God's transcendence over all finite earthly things'" (139). Lockwood points out that:

> Luther's willingness to acknowledge that God has bound himself to created means does not mean he was any less convinced of God's transcendence than the Reformed. Quite the opposite. It was his belief in God's almighty power that led him to assert that if the Creator chooses to join himself to part of his creation, and to unite the infinite with the finite by becoming incarnate, he is able to do so (139).

From Genesis into the New Testament, God is with His people. In Holy Communion, God is still with His people through the presence of Jesus Christ in the sacrament. However, "many people" exclude or evade Him (140). Even some Christians have allowed their views of God to be shaped by scientific discoveries. For them, God fills the gaps that science cannot explain. Long before the scientific age, Lutheran theologian Martin Chemnitz addressed this view of God when he states, "now Scripture explicitly says that God is not absent or far away but close at hand and present, that He fills heaven and earth with His being, His presence, His power, His creative and preserving ability, and His unique rule" (147).

In a culture that is more connected digitally but less so physically than before, with a God who is close at hand and fully involved in His creation and who offers His full attention, focus, and presence to a world that is far too experienced in absences, there is a fuller dimension of life available than a God of the gaps can give.

After a short critique of the millennial generation, Veith and Sutton offer a compliment, saying "this generation has accurately diagnosed a serious problem in modern society: the lack of work-life integration" (152). Here, the authors highlight the compartmentalizing of life before focusing on the Reformation teaching on vocation, which they argue "has been gradually lost" (153). What has been specifically lost is the early Reformation doctrine that "gave practical guidance to Christians in their marriage, parenthood, economic activity, and their role as citizens" (153). When vocation is reduced to occupation, Christians are given far less guidance on how to live in the other spheres of life.

The authors believe that recovering the Reformation understanding of vocation "would revitalize contemporary Christianity and show Christians how they can once again be the world's salt and light" (153). After reviewing how vocation is treated

in the Bible and by Luther, the authors explore "the Christians multiple vocations" (158). In the estates of church, household, and state, and the fourth estate to which Luther appeals—the "common order of Christian love"—we exercise our vocation by serving others. As Luther said, "God does not need our good works ... but our neighbor does" (165). Veith and Sutton recognize that:

> Vocation is where sanctification happens as Christians grow spiritually in faith and good works. Vocation is where evangelism happens as Christians teach their children and proclaim the Good News of Jesus to neighbors. Vocation is where cultural influence happens as Christians take their places and live out their faith in every niche of society (171).

After addressing several misconceptions of the Lutheran doctrine of two kingdoms, the authors set out a proper understanding. The Augsburg Confession teaches that "lawful civil regulations are good works of God" (180). As such, they are done in service to others in vocation and basic citizenship. God reigns in secular society through "His law, His Creation, and vocation" (181). God's law is the foundation for human laws. The laws of nature are given by God to govern His creation in its natural and material form. Vocation is how we serve others in society. That which opposes God's rule on earth must be opposed by Christians, including "cultures, ideologies, and practices" (181). Given this, the authors state:

> Because God's temporal kingdom is governed by His law, ideologies and practices that deny the reality of moral law—such as moral relativism, utilitarianism, permissiveness, and the notion that morality is nothing more than a social or personal construction—are not in accord with the doctrine of the two kingdoms (183).

Furthermore, "ideologies and practices that reject marriage, that undermine parenthood, that reduce economic activity to selfish greed, that repudiate all civil government, and that have no use for the church as an institution are not in accord with the doctrine of the two kingdoms" (188).

The temporal kingdom is joined to the spiritual kingdom in the Church, "a fellowship of faith and the Holy Spirit in hearts" (191). Both the temporal and spiritual kingdoms are under God, who is present in both, although His presence is not always evident. While God is hidden in the world, His presence in the Church is made evident in His Word and Sacraments. Moreover, Christians live in and through Christ with His presence within us so that we can love and serve others through our vocation, whether that be an occupation or in marriage, parenting, or in society.

Given all this, what makes Lutheranism—whether it is Lutheran theology, the Lutheran tradition, Lutheran spirituality, or Lutheran churches—relevant to our secular, postmodern world? As Veith and Sutton acknowledge, there is a sense of otherness to

traditional Lutheran worship. In the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, there is the *Lutheran Service Book*. In that book are rites for worship, hymns, prayers, and other resources that would be completely foreign to someone with no church background.

The authors assert that Lutheran worship "creates the awe, mystery, and beauty of holiness" (229) by proclaiming in word, music, and sacrament "the clear consistent message of Law and Gospel, Word and Sacrament, and the beautiful hiddenness of God in what may appear to be just ordinary life" (229). Veith and Sutton join others in a call for a new reformation equipped with the same theology that fueled the first reformation. They believe that Lutheran theology can draw postmodernists, secularists, "and those who are 'spiritual but not religious'" to Christ and His Church (231).

> The Church's next era should recover the authentic Christianity of the past and apply is fearlessly to whatever the future will bring. Christianity's continuing relevance can be made clear with the help of distinctly Lutheran insights: the nearness of God, the justifying peace of the cross, the mysterious hiddenness and presence of God in the Sacraments, and the divine purpose found in vocation (231).

The authors see the loss of influence that the church endured as it lived in an illusion created by a theology of glory as preparing the church for a new era when a theology of the cross prevails and leads into that new reformation that they long for. Of course, not every pastor, preacher, and theologian has received this memo. The "health and wealth" prosperity gospel still prevails in too many prominent churches. Still, there is the prospect that the church can embrace a theology of the cross with all that embrace entails. The insights of Lutheran theology can speak to the many and various individuals who have been misled by the prevailing ideologies of our day. The challenge from the Lutheran side of that encounter is to present the Gospel in all its fullness as the Holy Spirit prepares hearts and minds to receive it.

According to Veith and Sutton, there are 70 million or more Lutherans in the world today. There are over seven million Lutherans in America between the membership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, and other Lutheran church bodies. Over three million of those Lutherans are confessional Lutherans, meaning that they subscribe to the Book of Concord as teaching what the Scriptures teach. How can three million Lutherans influence 343 million Americans? The only way is with the sure and certain confidence that the Gospel is the good news for everyone regardless of race, current beliefs, economic status, or any other factor that influences beliefs. Veith and Sutton have given us an outline of Lutheran beliefs and how they are ripe for bringing to our time and place in North America. Will the Lutheran Church take up this challenge? Veith and Sutton present not only this challenge but reasons for believing that Lutheranism offers a Christianity of Christianities that is up to this challenge.

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Notes

1. Michael Graham, "The Six Way Fracturing of Evangelicalism," *Mere Orthodoxy*, https://mereorthodoxy.com/six-way-fracturing-evangelicalism/

2. Skyler R. Flowers and Michael Graham, "A Splintered Generation," *Christianity Today* (May/June 2025): https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/05/splintered-generation-fractured-evangelicals-graham-flowers/

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