

# Book Review

Dennis Ngien, *Paragon of Excellence: Luther's Sermons on 1 Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), xiv + 241 pp. \$32.00

Reviewed by Nicholas Hopman

DENNIS NGIEN HAS BEGUN TO FILL a lacuna in Luther Studies (*Lutherforschung*), namely, Luther's sermons on 1 Peter from 1522 and his broader reflections on 1 Peter. Luther scholarship has concentrated on his use of Paul's epistles to the near exclusion of his work on Peter's. Ngien's book brings 1 Peter into the discussion and finds considerable commonality between Luther's use of Peter and Paul.

In his foreword, Robert Kolb identifies 1 Peter as a catechetical book and sets the stage for Ngien's discovery of the categories that are the basic elements of Christian faith and life in Luther's sermons on 1 Peter. As Kolb notes, by 1522 Luther's theology was reaching maturity, so the timing of the sermons and their basis in a catechetical book make them especially relevant for understanding Luther's theology and, of course, how he presented it to the Wittenberg faithful.

Ngien's introduction is an extended presentation of Luther's theology. The numbered chapters then examine the foundational elements of Christian faith and life that he finds in Luther's sermons on 1 Peter. The first chapter, "God's Word as Performative," is heavily indebted to Oswald Bayer's *Promissio* (1972), which was published in English translation in the summer of 2025. Ngien distinguishes between the living nature of the gospel word, as opposed to the law, and discusses Luther's theological understanding of preaching. Drawing on Luther's preaching on 1 Peter 1:2, "[to those] chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for the sprinkling with His blood," Ngien lays out Luther's essentially trinitarian understanding of 1 Peter.

Chapter Two's ("Christ, the Chief Cornerstone") section on Luther's Christological reading of Psalm 118 in light of 1 Peter 2:10, "once you were no people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy," offers an interesting window into Luther's view of the

Testaments' relationship to one another. Its section on the theology of the cross versus the theology of glory does what has been too rarely attempted, relating the theology of the cross to the majestic doctrine of Christ's full divinity and humanity. This section provides some of the deepest analysis of the 1522 1 Peter sermons in the entire book.

Chapter Three examines Luther's distinction between Christ as sacrament and Christ as example, which he borrowed from Augustine. I found Ngien's discussion of Christ's preaching in hell (1 Peter 3:18) the most interesting section of the entire work. It is essential reading for those interested in the Formula of Concord or in ongoing debates among Christians about Christ's descent into hell. Chapter Four describes Luther's perspective on marriage, while Chapters Five and Six deal with the two kingdoms, respectively.

Luther's sermons on 1 Peter provide some interesting perspectives on the Christian's life in this world. Luther understood that the law could not produce the righteousness that suffices before God and, in fact, made things worse *coram deo*. He did not consider this to make the law unimportant or render right from wrong impossible to discern. The genre Ngien examines—sermons—makes Luther's assertions about the law interesting theologically, as well as ecclesiastically and socially.

Ngien's perspective places a strong emphasis on the freedom of the gospel and the freedom of the Christian. For example, he often quotes and references Gerhard Forde. However, his knowledge and use of contemporary and recent commentators on Luther is encyclopedic. Certain members of the gospel freedom caucus among Lutherans are prone to sloganeering and overly systematic summaries of Luther's theology. Ngien helps by weaving together a tapestry of Luther's theological commonplaces found in these sermons. The fact that not only these sermons but also Luther's thoughts on 1 Peter in general have hardly played a role in Luther Studies makes Ngien's book all the more helpful.

The lengthy introduction is a useful summary of Luther's theology. However, most readers eager to examine a particular sermon series from Luther are likely already very familiar with the topics covered in the introduction. The general discourse on Luther's theology continues through significant portions of Chapter One before turning to the sermons on 1 Peter. At times, one has to rely on the endnotes to identify the passage within those sermons from which the quote or concept comes.

Interested Lutherans and other Christians, including those in undergraduate theology or seminary courses, could benefit from reading the introductory presentation of Luther's theology. Ngien's style is accessible throughout the book, but

Luther scholars can particularly benefit from his work on Luther's sermons on 1 Peter. Hopefully, Ngien's book will also stimulate further work on Luther's use of 1 Peter in his 1522 sermons and beyond.

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