

Book Reviews

Mark Stirling and Mark Meynell (eds), *Not So with You: Power and Leadership for the Church* (Wipf & Stock, 2023), 261 pages. ISBN: 9781666760163.

Reviewed by Einike Pilli

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‘It is a tragedy for the church that this book is necessary’ (p. 200). So states Mark Stirling, one of the book’s two editors. The subtitle, *Power and Leadership for the Church*, partly explains why. Problems with power in leadership are not unknown in the church and need to be addressed. Addressing these issues is believed to be the best way to overcome such problems. This is the aim of the editors.

One of the editors, Mark Stirling, explains that we cannot stop using power, even though we need to use it rightly ‘as those who are united with Christ and being restored in his image’ (p. 13). This quotation itself illustrates the approach the editors take: it is predominantly biblical and theological, rather than exclusively psychological. It addresses possibly shared erroneous thinking rather than accusing problematic personalities. ‘How we understand power [...] depends on our understanding of God himself’ (p. 3) expresses their conviction.

This collection of articles comes in two parts: biblical and theological foundations, and practical and pastoral reflections. As in every collection of articles, some are more inspiring and contextually relevant than others. But all help the reader to understand what has to be different from the worldly way of using power.

From the first part, one of the most theological articles in the book is written by Chris Wright, referring to the title of the book: ‘You Must Not Do as They Do’, but doing it from an Old Testament perspective (quoting Leviticus 18:3). He explains how Israelite society was different from others through the example of their leader, Moses. In the Old Testament, the ultimate power was God and all other leaders,

priests included, were evaluated according to their loyalty and obedience to God. This other kind of power was ‘exercised on behalf of the powerless’ (p. 41).

In the second, pastoral part of the book, the most relevant for me as a reader was the chapter ‘Signs and Symptoms of Unhealthy Leaders and Their Systems’ by Mark Stirling. He offers a helpful diagnostic question for the right use of power: does the church actively solicit feedback and is it seen to act upon it? If this is not happening, there are several signs: the leader talks about his/her own authority; those who ask questions become a problem to be managed; competitiveness develops; the church does not talk well about those who are leaving; and other possible signs. By contrast, the author lists the signs of a healthy church with godly leadership: it treats people with generosity; encourages feedback; speaks well of other churches; publicly and positively blesses those who leave; and serves other members of the body of Christ, especially when it is costly (p. 206).

Having been in church all my life helps me appreciate this book. It helps to look at power issues within the churches from a right theological perspective and to be careful even about small signs of unhealthy leadership. No church in the world is immune to these temptations, even if the types of risks are different. Using power in a godly way is a question of living with trust and integrity, and thus, is a question of living the life of God’s Kingdom.

Wendy J. Porter, *Worship, Music and Interpretation: Exploratory Essays*. McMaster General Studies Series (Pickwick Publications, 2024), 442 pages. ISBN: 9798385223305.

Reviewed by Tony Peck

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This unusual volume brings together seventeen essays written over the past 25 years or so by the Professor of Music and Worship at McMaster Divinity College, Canada. It brings together her academic interests in early Greek documents and texts, and the history of music written for

the Church, as well as her experience as a worship leader in evangelical churches. This is reflected in the three sections of the book: 'Music and Interpretation in the Early Church', 'Musical Traditions and Interpretations', and 'The Past and Present of Music and Worship'. Throughout, Porter is interested in the question of how music composers may have influenced their hearers' interpretation of the Bible and sacred texts (such as those of the Mass) by the emphases of their musical settings.

In the first section, Porter deals with the tantalisingly scant evidence from the New Testament and elsewhere of how the early church may have worshipped and used music in worship. The presence of hymn-like passages (such as the one in Philippians chapter 2) raises the question of whether they were written by Paul and other authors, or whether they are quoting an established 'hymn' tradition which then may well have been set to some kind of music or chanting.

Porter admits that the 'incidental evidence' does not lead to clear conclusions, and that some of the existing scholarly hypotheses are somewhat tendentious. She comes to the judicious conclusion that early Christian worship and its music probably developed from within Judaism but was also influenced by the Greco-Roman world in which many of the earliest congregations found themselves.

In one essay Porter examines the Greek text of 1 Corinthians 14: 34–35 and makes the interesting suggestion that Paul's prohibition on women speaking in church may have something to do with a style of prophesying accompanied by a musical instrument, rather than a blanket prohibition.

In part two, chapters mainly focus on classical composers from the sixteenth to the twentieth century with some fascinating insights into the way in which they have interpreted biblical and liturgical texts. I found it rather incongruous that we then move on to a chapter on 'contemporary worship songs and suffering', followed by one on 'Christian worship and the Toronto blessing'. But Porter casts a critical eye over contemporary worship in both contexts, making suggestions for improvement and a more balanced diet of musical worship.

I did not find totally convincing the parallels Porter draws between the work of the renowned sixteenth-century English church composer, William Byrd, and contemporary evangelical worship. I did, however, find myself in agreement with Porter's plea to write new songs to meet the present age and contemporary movements of the Spirit. I wish that she could have explored this further, in terms of songs that arise from local situations, in order to balance the 'globalisation' of much contemporary worship music.

The final chapter is a helpful summary of theological reflections on the history of Christian worship with an emphasis on songs, hymns, and choral music.

Overall, this is an interesting set of essays dealing with a subject that does not receive a lot of attention in the churches today. I recommend it for Christian leaders who want to reflect more widely, deeply, and critically on the place of music in contemporary worship.

Carlo Calleja, *Communities of Kinship: Retrieving Christian Practices of Solidarity with Lepers as a Paradigm for Overcoming Exclusion of Older People* (Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2024), 187 pages. ISBN: 9781978711976.

Reviewed by Peter Stevenson

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The unlikely pairing of lepers alongside older people in the subtitle could deter some from exploring this thought-provoking study. However, this exploration of the concept of kinship deserves attention, because it raises important questions about the ways in which society regards and treats older people. It could help to stimulate discussion about the church's ministry within the context of our ageing European populations.

Arguing that Western society is ‘creating an environment that is increasingly hostile to older persons’, Carlo Calleja seeks to retrieve the practice of kinship that he believes has ‘been lost through the cracks of contemporary society’ (pp. xxiv–xxv).

Chapter 2 explores the particular ‘loss of kinship with older people’, offering a disturbing picture of the social, economic, and political factors which help to marginalise older people. In societies where ‘the young adult male is the norm’ (p. 30), older persons, with their complex health needs, can be viewed as a burden on society. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben’s ideas about the *homo sacer*, Calleja fears that society often regards the lives of older persons as being of little value. This leads to the chilling claim that by ‘masking the aging process and relegating them to nursing homes’ older persons ‘are virtually eliminated through isolation and long-term institutionalization. In states where physician-assisted suicide [...] is legal, elimination is actual and overt’ (p. 27). While such stark statements can be challenged, this chapter paints a haunting picture of factors contributing to the marginalisation and exclusion of many older people.

Calleja responds by arguing for a commitment to a ‘solidaristic kinship’ which can help rebuild connections with marginalised groups such as older people. Such solidarity goes beyond ‘biological kinship’ based on genetics or ‘spiritual kinship’ based on membership of a religious group. Within ‘solidaristic kinship’ the element which both parties have in common is ‘affliction’. The relationship with older persons must be characterised not by paternalistic benevolence, but by a ‘vulnerability’ which is willing to share in the suffering of the other. A commitment to the regular practice of such ‘incarnational solidarity’ (pp. 57–58) generates virtues which shape Christian character.

Calleja refers to ways in which the church developed practices expressing solidarity with lepers. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, urged believers into ‘showing sympathy and brotherhood’ to people suffering with leprosy, because the victim of disease was one’s ‘kinsman and fellow-servant’ (pp. 117–118). More recently the L’Arche and Sant’ Egidio communities are living examples of practising incarnational solidarity with marginalised people. Recognising that there is no magical

formula for putting such theory into practice, Calleja urges the church to find practical ways of expressing solidarity with older people and others on the margins.

The author makes clear that practising solidaristic kinship with others is more than just an enriching experience for individual believers. For when the church develops practices of incarnational solidarity with people on the margins, it is reaffirming their value and offering an alternative vision to society.

As one older reader, this scholarly work leaves me with some serious questions to ponder.

Teun van der Leer, *Looking in the Other Direction: The Story of the Believers Church Conferences*. Amsterdam Series in Baptist and Mennonite Theologies (Pickwick Publications, 2023), 528 pages. ISBN: 9781666766790.

Reviewed by Ksenija Magda

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In this massive work, Teun van der Leer does not merely shift furniture on the proverbial 'upper floor' of the church (of which Christ is the foundational first floor). He reconstructs half of that floor by targeting baptism. Applying what has emerged as a theology of believers' churches (BC) from the nineteen BC conferences between 1967 and 2017, he has attempted the impossible: to argue that BC – traditionally labelled as 'sects' – have developed 'a style of conversation' (if not a theology) for the stuffy ecumenical encounters, although by sheer definition BC are 'principally diverse, distinctive, and provisional', focused on the now, and avoiding if possible any 'one perpetual voice' (p. 438).

In the seven chapters of Part I, Van der Leer examines the content of BC conferences through his fourfold lens (faith, community, hermeneutics, and mission) to identify theological trends around these items in the papers and to detect possible new themes. In the remaining

two chapters, which form Part II, he constructs parameters for an ecumenical conversation on baptism. His conclusion: a ‘kenotic’ attitude is needed (and is already developing). If believers accept infant baptism and confirmation as their completed Christian initiation, BC should not ‘trouble’ them with ‘re-baptism’ (p. 463). This is already an existing ecumenical practice in most BC, as they accept other Christians as brothers and sisters. For churches baptising infants, a ‘kenotic’ attitude may mean to accept graciously that some of their members may be led by the Spirit to believer’s baptism.

Presenting the 50 years’ worth of BC conference material is in itself a contribution to knowledge. But Van der Leer’s book is hugely valuable beyond this immediate agenda and he cautiously points to some of those issues. I, for one, was stunned by the inclusion of women as speakers in the early BC conferences which listed even the Christian Catholic feminist pioneer, Rosemary Redford Ruether. Researching when and why women appear and disappear from the programme of BC conferences may be illuminating.

The book could have introduced technical terms and especially relationships among the BC more clearly. The definition of the relationship between BC and evangelicalism should not have waited until chapter 3. ‘National church’ and BC are discussed against the US background near the end, but questions about European evangelicals, and the German ‘Evangelisch/Evangelikal’ distinction are only marginal. As in a mystery novel, things are eventually (partially) resolved in the realisation that such conclusions can be drawn only after conference contents have been scrutinised. Surprising opportunities for conclusions become evident. For me, the nature of Southern Baptist ‘take-over’ is clearly revealed not as a minor deflection from BC on random issues, but as a major manipulative shift away from BC to an institution utilising state power to protect one’s own (faith?) political privilege (pp. 321–322). I am certain that by reading this book, you will find your own “Aha” moments in unexpected places.

J. August Higgins, *The Crisis of Conversion: Reimagining Religious Experience for a Postmodern Evangelical Spirituality*. Amsterdam Series in Baptist and Mennonite Theologies (Pickwick Publications, 2024), 163 pages. ISBN: 9798385204618.

Reviewed by Toivo Pilli

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J. August Higgins's book *The Crisis of Conversion* is the second volume in the Amsterdam Series in Baptist and Mennonite Theologies. The Series is a platform for scholars to publish monographs and collections of articles on topics such as Baptist and Mennonite history, systematic theology, ethics, and biblical hermeneutics. The present volume fits very well into this framework as it explores one of the central issues in evangelical theology: conversion. The author argues that focus on conversion should be seen in relation to a wider shift of experience moving into the centre of Christian spirituality, historically during times of great revivals, with continuous influence in evangelical traditions.

The reader needs to start with an awareness of a crisis within North American evangelical life around the issue of religious experience. The author helpfully describes the roots of the problem; for example, the role of Jonathan Edwards's teaching of the experience of conversion, or 'gracious affections', and the 'internal vital principle' of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. All this reorientated the conversion event towards the individual's experience of God, a clear shift from the earlier Puritan model. Ralph Waldo Emerson added an aspect of aesthetic subjectivity to the picture; though, as the author emphasises, his idealistic 'self-reliant individualism' was limited and could not 'properly address even the most morally egregious evil of his day, slavery' (p. 124).

Higgins also brings into the discussion the American Pragmatist philosophical tradition, represented in the volume by William James and Josiah Royce. They focused more on 'reflective depths of sustained systematic inquiry', using methods of logic, psychology, and semiotics. In brief: one problem with religious experience is how personal

experienced beliefs can be translated into lived-out reality and influence wider society, including larger religious traditions. And what is the normative dimension of experience? These, and other, critical questions have only become sharper with the emergence of postmodern worldviews.

Seeking for a constructive way forward, the volume develops an academic conversation between Sandra Schneiders's methodological approach and Amos Yong's pneumatological theology, offering possibilities to alleviate tension between the individual and the community, individual experience, and biblical interpretation in Christian spirituality. Higgins does not put aside or diminish the role of experience, as Enlightenment Rationalism or evangelical foundationalism tended to do. Instead, he has made a plausible attempt to 'recover a more vibrant notion of religious experience', especially using Amos Yong's concept of 'pneumatological imagination'. The argument in the book provides a pathway forward for 'the recovery of solid epistemological method that retains both the centrality of religious experience for evangelical spirituality, and the centrality of the Bible for evangelical theology' (p. 147). This volume by Higgins demonstrates that evangelical convictions can find fresh interpretations and dynamic transformation in conversation with other traditions, such as Roman Catholic and pentecostal-charismatic.

Klaus Koschorke, *A Short History of Christianity Beyond the West: Asia, Africa, and Latin America 1450–2000* (Brill, 2025), 374 pages. ISBN: 9789004699823.

Reviewed by Tommaso Manzon

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Klaus Koschorke is Professor Emeritus at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich in Early and Global History of Christianity, as well as the recipient of several guest professorships in multiple global universities. His area of expertise is the history of Christianity in the Global South. In terms of his conceptual contributions, he is best

remembered for developing the concept of polycentricity in reference to the history of World Christianity.

Koschorke's latest output, here reviewed, bears the title *A Short History of Christianity Beyond the West* and presents itself as an introductory-level textbook, seeking to offer a 'compact and vivid overview of the history of Christianity in Asia, Africa, and Latin America since 1450, focussing on diversity and interdependence, local actors and global effects' (from the back cover). By doing so, the author aims to present a panorama of the development of non-Western (mostly Protestant and Roman Catholic) Christianities and to 'contribute to a more integrated view of the history of Christianity in the non-Western world' (p. xxiv).

If these are the author's stated goals, we can safely say that he manages to reach them. Within the space of a mid-sized book (that is, by textbook standards), the author succeeds in making the reader aware of the fundamental contours of an often-neglected segment of the history of World Christianity. The structure of Christianity as a global and polycentric movement is well presented with reference to different areas and stages of history. The work is divided into five chronological cesurae, each discussed with reference to Latin America, Africa, and Asia, maintaining throughout an accessible, tied, at times gripping narrative. As a plus, both the volume as a whole and each individual chapter comes attached with an abundant bibliography as well as illustrations and maps.

In terms of the book's limitations, one could point out the almost total exclusion of any discussion of Eastern Orthodoxy. Of course, this is an understandable choice in order not to inflate the book's volume. Nonetheless, at times, the feeling is that of an incomplete picture. Moreover, there are some repetitions and editing omissions, especially in the central portions of the text.

To sum it up, *A Short History of Christianity Beyond the West* is a totally recommended reading for those who are seeking an accessible introduction to the subject of World Christianity. It is also valuable as a dependable reference book, as well as a source of direction in terms of further readings, given its solid bibliographical apparatus.

Pontien Ndagijimana Batibuka, *Baptism as an Event of Taking Responsibility* (Langham Academic, 2022), 272 pages. ISBN: 9781839732348.

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Pontien Ndagijimana Batibuka's book, with its full title: *Baptism as an Event of Taking Responsibility: A New Reading of Romans 5:12–6:23*, offers a strikingly original interpretation of baptism by situating it within the broader framework of ancient initiation practices. Rather than treating baptism solely as a theological symbol or sacramental rite, Batibuka approaches it as a transformative event that shares structural similarities with socio-religious initiation rituals found across cultures. This comparative lens allows him to highlight baptism as a decisive moment of transition, one that marks both divine encounter and human responsibility.

Central to Batibuka's argument is his fourfold model of baptism. He describes baptism as: (1) a divine encounter in which God acts to claim and consecrate the believer; (2) a break with the old life, symbolising the renunciation of sin and former allegiances; (3) a public transfer of loyalty, where the baptised individual openly declares allegiance to Christ; and (4) a commitment to a new way of living, expressed through ethical responsibility and communal participation. This framework resonates deeply within African contexts, where communal rites of passage are integral to identity formation. In such settings, baptism is not merely a private spiritual act but a radical, public consecration to Christ that redefines one's place within the community of faith.

In this work the author also engages the long-standing theological debate concerning divine and human agency in baptism. He resists the polarisation that has often divided interpreters: on one side, sacramental readings that emphasise divine action to the point of minimising human response; on the other, symbolic readings that

reduce baptism to a mere human testimony of faith. Batibuka insists that baptism must be understood as both God's intervention and the believer's pledge of responsibility. This dual emphasis, he argues, recovers baptism's ethical and communal dimensions, reminding the church that baptism is not only about grace received but also about responsibility assumed.

Although Batibuka does not explicitly reference them, his work reawakens mid-twentieth-century discussions on baptism associated with Emil Brunner and Karl Barth. Brunner challenged the traditional objective-subjective antithesis dividing views on baptism. He emphasised the relational character of baptism, highlighting the interplay between divine agency and human response in faith. Barth, particularly in his later writings, distinguished between Spirit baptism, which he believed occurred at conversion, and water baptism, which he regarded as a purely human act of ethical commitment to the cause of Christ. Batibuka's emphasis on responsibility echoes these earlier debates, situating his work within a broader theological trajectory.

Nevertheless, Batibuka's reliance on initiation categories raises methodological concerns. While his comparative approach is innovative, importing external socio-religious frameworks into Romans risks distorting Paul's Christological and pneumatological focus. A more comprehensive and biblically grounded interpretation might have emerged through engagement with a wider range of Pauline texts. Furthermore, Batibuka's strong emphasis on responsibility occasionally overshadows Paul's message of grace. The mystical dimension of baptism as union with Christ so central to Romans 6–8 is somewhat diminished in favour of ethical responsibility.

In conclusion, this book is a creative contribution to baptismal theology. It reframes baptism as a decisive act of responsibility and communal ethics, offering fresh insights particularly relevant in African contexts. While its methodological and theological limitations mean it should be supplemented by broader Pauline scholarship, the work succeeds in stimulating renewed reflection on the meaning and significance of baptism for the contemporary church.

Mark Valeri, *The Opening of the Protestant Mind: How Anglo-American Protestants Embraced Religious Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 308 pages. ISBN: 978-0197663677.

Reviewed by Drew Patton

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The Opening of the Protestant Mind has as its aim a very specific yet monumental task of redefining the way conversion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is understood. Mark Valeri states that one of the major aims of the book is to discuss the changing perceptions of the understanding of other religions, including the importance of moral liberty in that comprehension. This aim is significant, in that it shows that Valeri's book is not making a specific argument per se. Rather, he sets out to make a more general presentation that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglo-American Protestant thinking regarding conversion was much more varied and less concrete than is often thought. The sources for Valeri's work are travel narratives, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and popular books of the time. Valeri points out that the travel narratives themselves were the sources of much of what was believed about people throughout the world, and that the demonisation of those peoples and their religions was categorically bolstered by certain popular narratives. However, after the interregnum and especially after the English Civil War these narratives became less hostile and more curious.

The rest of Valeri's book shows the increasing curiosity of the British and Anglo-American perspective on various religions, both in their immediate experiences (as with the Indigenous Americans) and with people they rarely came across, such as peoples from Asia. Valeri points out rather intently that the political climate for Anglos and Anglo-Americans was of utmost importance and a chief influence on the mindset of Protestants in the British Kingdom. When the political climate was in turmoil, such as during the Civil War and Interregnum period, those writing about religious expressions outside of the majority Protestant mindset were viewed with scepticism and disdain; however, when the politics of the country were more firmly planted, the majority

of Protestants were much more open to religious differences and different religions. At the same time, Valeri makes clear that many Protestants did not have a problem holding what he calls contradictory points of view, especially concerning political and social freedom for Africans and Indigenous Americans.

Valeri's argument in *The Opening of the Protestant Mind* is well supported and is much more reasonable than the black and white perspective of modernist historians. Valeri makes his point with solid sourcing and great nuance, showing that attempts to coalesce opinions into one unified understanding are not only impractical but also belie the facts these sources reveal. Valeri's sources themselves have limits, specifically the lack of self-awareness of colonial efforts by missionaries and others who sought to evangelise the heathen while broadening the empire's reach. Furthermore, Valeri's emphasis on sources that lacked self-awareness could be seen as limiting the objective understanding necessary for making the claims from primary sources that Valeri tends to make. Ultimately, Valeri's book *The Opening of the Protestant Mind* is a fresh look at a specific time period and the way in which people in that time frame changed and challenged perspectives on others.