

**Kenneth Mtata, editor, *“You Have the Words of Eternal Life”:
Transformative Readings of the Gospel of John from a Lutheran
Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2012).
168pp. \$15.00 paper.**

This volume consists of a number of essays originating from an international consultation held by the Lutheran World Federation (hereafter LWF) in 2011, which constituted the beginning of a hermeneutics project aimed at nurturing the “desire to ‘read’ shared sacred texts and contexts,” as Martin Junge explains in the preface (5). In all, ten authors have contributed as many chapters touching on questions related to contextual Lutheran hermeneutics in our contemporary world of rapidly changing, and often quite different, contexts in which faith communities seek to bring the text of Scripture to bear on the concerns arising from within these respective contexts.

In the first chapter, entitled “Introduction” (7-22), the editor, Kenneth Mtata, provides a helpful framework from which to approach the subsequent essays. Mtata points to the difficulty arising from the need to interpret “fixed biblical texts” in contemporary contexts that are, contrastively, “rapidly changing” (7). Two extremes, he says, tend to emanate from the dilemma caused by the locational and temporal distance that contemporary faith communities experience vis-à-vis the texts of Scripture—texts which they need to appropriate without misreading, while, at the same time, not misreading their own contemporary context. These two extremes are: 1) the assumption that biblical texts are to be literally interpreted and directly applied to life in the contemporary context; and 2) the conclusion that these texts cannot have a formative role to shape faith and life in our day consequent to their antiquity (7). LWF, Mtata avers, must maneuver “between these two extremes” (7). In approaching this hermeneutical task, the contributors take an explicitly confessional stance (7-8), resulting in a concern for three interpretive or hermeneutical “poles”: 1) the biblical text; 2) tradition, including ecumenical, Lutheran, and Reformation traditions; and 3) the diverse contemporary reading contexts (9). Mtata elucidates, “The aim is not to emphasize the variety of reading contexts, but to find shared reading practices, regulated by the common reading lens of the Lutheran and ecumenical traditions” (9).

While at relevant points in his essay Mtata introduces the various contributions of his colleagues presented in the chapters to follow, he nevertheless does not merely summarize their respective perspectives but weighs in personally on the various issues. In doing so, he makes some helpful contributions to the overall discussion, not the least of which is his discussion of potentially problematic features (Mtata refers

to these as “challenges”) of contextual hermeneutics, such as: 1) “its over-dependency on the political function of the law in which the Bible and theology become indistinguishable from any other secular discourse” (15) and the sinfulness of humankind is sometimes not adequately addressed (16); 2) a general lack of clarity with regard to what constitutes both context and effective context in the hermeneutical process (16); 3) the inclusion of the reading communities experiences along with Scripture and tradition in theological reflection. “The question remains whether this foregrounding of human experience does not weaken efforts toward objectivity” (17-18); 4) the endorsement of earthly political establishments in God’s name, and the concomitant tendency “to employ a hermeneutical key from social, economic or political theories with clear proposals and then use the biblical text or theological reflection to legitimate such theories” (18). Mtata observes such criticism of contextual theology often stems from a Western theological context, which has produced its own contextual theologians and, in fact, must come to grips with the reality that a contextual approach is not optional but the old content of faith must be received in new contexts (18). In any case, Mtata has highlighted some crucial concerns that deserve further reflective engagement and ought to be kept in mind as one reads the other essays in this volume.

In chapter 2, Hans-Peter Grosshans provides an outline of Lutheran hermeneutics. He proceeds by way of a historical survey that highlights hermeneutical developments from the early church, Luther, the Croatian Lutheran theologian, Matthias Flacius, and many others up through the modern period. Grosshans concludes the main concern of modern Lutheran hermeneutics is not the interpretation of biblical texts so as to attain “self-affirmation” or “self-reassurance” but rather “critically to listen to and hear what the biblical text has to tell us as the Word of God with respect to our lives in various contexts and situations we live in” (45). The results, however, will differ from one context to another; and this “plurality of contextual understandings” is theologically interpreted as indicative of “the vividness and concreteness” of God’s self-communication. “The Triune God is not an imperialistic emperor who has only one message for everybody in the world and wants everybody to live their lives in the same way” (45). These are theologically loaded statements that invite further reflection with regard to whether God does, in fact, communicate a diversity of messages in different contexts through the same scriptural texts. If the meaning and message of Scripture were univocal and unchanging, would this really imply God is an “imperialistic emperor”? Is it possible that God has one basic message and desires us all to live our lives in the same basic ways (in accordance with love for one’s

neighbor, with certain moral standards, etc.), even though the actual application of such principles will take on culturally appropriate forms?

Next, in chapter 3, Anni Hentschel discusses “Luther’s Relevance for Contemporary Hermeneutics.” Hentschel affirms the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer (51-54) and adheres to a reader-response methodology. She asserts the notion of a text having a single unchanging meaning is “a modern concept” adhered to neither by the authors of Scripture nor by Martin Luther (54). “In light of Gadamer’s central insight and modern reception theories, namely that the reader plays an essential part in producing the meaning of a text, the biblical text itself cannot be seen as complete and sufficient” (57). Rather, the text is external and, while necessary, it remains insufficient until the Holy Spirit inspires the reader’s reading process (57). Hentschel thus espouses a “reader oriented inspiration theory” (57 n37), and posits truth is not found in the words of Scripture but “is in God and when someone reads the Bible and God’s Spirit opens their eyes to the truth during the reading process, then faith can emerge and the reader comes into contact with the truth” (62-63). As I read this chapter, I could not help but wonder what Luther would have thought in regard to Hentschel’s appropriation of his writings in support of her reader-oriented approach. Moreover, does not Scripture itself claim the text, rather than the reader, is the proper locus of inspiration? (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16). Finally, some may wonder whether Hentschel would affirm her own essay is multivocal, or whether she would wish her reader to seek diligently to discern the univocal sense intended by the author who composed this essay.

Chapter 4 provides “An Introduction to the Gospel of John and Questions of Lutheran Hermeneutics,” by the well-known Johannine scholar, Craig R. Koester. This is followed by Sarah Hinlicky Wilson’s discussion of law and gospel (chapter 5), in which she delineates five common misreadings of law and gospel within the history of Lutheran interpretation (85), and seeks to show how John’s Gospel is “particularly resistant” to these misinterpretations and serves to reorient Lutherans “toward Luther’s original sense” in the law-gospel distinction (90-91).

In chapter 6, “Political Love: Why John’s Gospel is not as Barren for Contemporary Ethics as it Might Appear,” Bernd Wannewetsch argues, “There are powerful and specifically modern biases that trigger the suspicion that with John we cannot do the sort of ethics we think we should be doing today” (94). He attempts “a fresh reading” of John in which he discusses an ethics of belonging (97-100) and what is meant by sisterly and brotherly love, which he explicates in terms of theological specificity rather than a reductive narrowing of the love

command (102). He also seeks to develop the political implications of this love (102ff.).

In chapter 7, "Exploring Effective Context—Luther's Contextual Hermeneutics," Vitor Westhelle posits textual meaning "changes decisively depending on a series of factors: the author's setting, the circumstances under which a text is read, and also texts that are in- or excluded" (108). This assertion is open to question, for the author fails to differentiate between *meaning* and *interpretation*. As an example of the receiving context's impact upon meaning, he points to disparate readings of the Exodus narrative by, for example, liberation theologians in Latin America, over against black South Africans, Dravidians, Native Americans and Mexicans whose land had been taken by people often appealing to the same promises of a land they were to conquer in God's name (109). As an example of selective reading and its impact on meaning, Westhelle points to the childhood experience of Howard Thurman who recalls a preacher who relied solely on Pauline texts in preaching to black farm laborers as opposed to Thurman's mother who only read the Gospels to him (109). Such examples clearly demonstrate how the aforementioned factors affected the *interpretation*, *understanding*, and *use* of Scripture; but these are not necessarily the same as the *meaning* of Scripture. Westhelle draws on postcolonial theory (111-12) and Luther to develop the hermeneutical criteria of pertinence, innovation, and transfiguration (112-20).

In chapter 8, "Lutheran Hermeneutics and New Testament Studies: Some Political and Cultural Implications," Eve-Marie Becker opines Lutheran hermeneutics has great political ramifications, for example, in how the Pauline doctrine of justification is construed (125). The author believes Lutheran hermeneutics may potentially enrich and stimulate both theologization and cultural life (126).

In chapter 9, "Bible, Tradition and the Asian Context," Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon calls for contextual biblical interpreters who will interpret both Scripture and tradition in ways that are organically connected to communities where there are tremendous problems related to human rights violations, oppression of the poor, exclusion of women, violence of various kinds, destruction of the environment, and the like (137-38). Melanchthon wishes to discern how to give "equal importance" to Lutheran and Indian traditions, utilizing the "richness" of both in biblical interpretation and theologization (141-42). She asks, "How can one best address the complexities of the Bible, the Lutheran tradition and the Indian context without privileging any one in particular?" (143). She suggests a multifaith or multicultural hermeneutic in which one engages in "reading in juxtaposition," allowing for continuous production of meaning as new readers posit

their own interpretations of the texts under discussion, none of which represent the ultimate meaning of these religious texts (143). By way of example, Melanchthon reads John 4 in juxtaposition with the writings of Akkamahadevi, a twelfth-century *bhakta* from Karnataka, India (143-45). As a result, the Samaritan woman emerges as an exemplar of agency and autonomy, a courageous woman who protested “societal norms and expectations” by living with a man to whom she was not married (145). While some may find Melanchthon’s conclusions regarding John 4 more than a little eisegetical and perhaps exhibiting a rather troubling moral trajectory, I wish to address another area of concern, one which relates to this scholar’s overall methodology: If we were to follow Melanchthon’s example in her attempt to address the complexities of the Bible, her Lutheran tradition, and her Indian tradition “without privileging any one [of these] in particular,” would we not, then, have effectively neutralized the authoritative role of Scripture in relation to our traditional and cultural contexts? Furthermore, if none of these three sources (the Bible, one’s ecclesial tradition, and one’s cultural context/tradition) enjoys a privileged status in one’s theologizing, how will one adjudicate matters when these respective sources are found to be at odds with one another?

In chapter 10, Dennis T. Olson rounds off the discussion with his reflective and suggestive treatment of the role of tradition as it relates to Scripture. Rather than seeking definitively to answer the host of questions raised by this topic, Olson poses three sets of questions and proffers reflections germane to the issues so presented (151).

In conclusion, I recommend this volume for the consideration of those interested in hermeneutics and contextual theology. The format of the book is basically user-friendly and attractive, some pesky minor typographical errors notwithstanding. Ease of use, however, might have been facilitated by the inclusion of subject, author, and Scripture indices, none of which are found in this volume. With regard to various theological perspectives reflected in this volume, I have already registered a few concerns throughout this review. Nonetheless, the volume makes a serious contribution to ongoing discussions about hermeneutical methodology, especially in regard to contextual biblical interpretation, reader-response approaches, and how one’s traditional heritage and confessional stance should relate to hermeneutics. Many important questions that deserve continued scholarly engagement are brought to the surface in this collection of essays and, for this reason alone, it is well worth the read.