A Book Worth Discussing

A Symposium

Dennis Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose: On Fearing, Loving, and Trusting God* with a foreword by Graham Tomlin (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2025)

Introduction

Paul R. Hinlicky

Under our banner A Book Worth Discussing, we introduce in this issue what we hope will be a frequent entry, namely, the Symposium. A symposium gathers a circle of scholars responding to an author, not so much to write a formal book review but rather to engage the book's main argument either to excavate it for discussion, or to engage the argument either in appreciation and amplification, or in critique to commend an alternative.

We are delighted in the second number of *Promissio* to feature the newly released book of our colleague, Dr. Dennis Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose: Luther on Fearing, Trusting, and Loving God*, a book which is a scholarly synthesis of the nature and purpose of theology as knowledge of God in Martin Luther. Dr. Ngien is one of our Distinguished Professors and a Research Associate. Recently the Institute of Lutheran theology formally established the Center for Reformational Theology and Spirituality under his leadership. This affiliation deepens our confessional and intellectual commitments and provides an additional locus for scholarly and ecclesial outreach. So, this symposium on his new Luther book provides a wonderful introduction of Dr. Ngien to Promissio's readership. An untimely circumstance prevented him from responding to the contributions to the symposium, but we plan to publish his reflections on it in the Summer issue.

Enjoy this intellectual feast with Dr. Jonathan Sorum lifting up that "most earnest purpose" to be that God succeeds in becoming our God; with Christ School of Theology PhD student Rev. Drew Christiansen highlighting the Trinitarian organization of Luther's theology according to our author; and Dr. Erik Herrmann setting God's "most earnest purpose" today against our incipient culture of nihilism. Happy reading! —PRH

Who, How, and What

Jonathan Sorum

Under the title *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, Dennis Ngien has written a helpful synthesis of the results of Luther research in the last one hundred years or so. "God's most earnest purpose," is, of course, that God should finally succeed in being our God. Since it is the Triune God who actually succeeds in being our God, Ngien rightly points out that a recovery of the church's confession of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is at the heart of Luther's reformation. This is more than just a recovery of the ancient dogma. The "*what*" of Luther's theology is first of all instruction about *how* to proclaim the gospel so that the One *who* is proclaimed is in fact the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Lutheran reformation is essentially a movement in pastoral care. The church of Luther's time set forth a way of salvation (a "how") within a comprehensive view, not only of earth but also of heaven, purgatory, and hell, prescribing how one could avoid hell, navigate through purgatory, and finally arrive in heaven. The "how" of salvation grew not out of the "who" of who God is but the "what" of what God is (holy), what humans are (sinful), and what humans must do to be reconciled to God. Since this way was a long struggle with sin, the Sacrament of Penance was crucial. The church prescribed three things penitents must do: be truly contrite (or at least wish they were), make a full and honest confession of sins, and perform the prescribed satisfactions. The problem, as Luther discovered in his own case and then in his pastoral practice, was that the Sacrament of Penance did not work. It could not bring comfort to the anxious conscious facing the judgment of God because one could never be sure that one was truly contrite or had made a full and honest confession of sin, and one could not be sure that works of satisfaction accomplished anything at all before God. What is worse, this was not a bug in the system but a feature. The system required that people be kept uncertain about their statuses before God in order to keep them motivated to obey the church authorities. Instead of bringing freedom, the church used fear to control people and, not incidentally, to keep the money flowing. Worst of all, the system did not require Christ or the Holy Spirit. The church still retained the doctrine of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but the "who" of who God is was suppressed.

Luther's breakthrough arose from the intersection of his intensive study of Scripture and his practice of pastoral care in the confessional. He came to realize that the whole point of confession was the absolution. The current theology understood the absolution as a judgment made by the confessor that the penitent was sincerely sorry and truly repenting. Luther began to understand that the absolution was God's Word that actually gives Christ to the sinner as

free gift, a word of promise that can only be received by faith.[1] It is usual to call this God's effective Word, which is certainly is, but it is effective not because it is somehow not an ordinary human word. The point is that God himself is a specific ordinary human word, which, because it is *external* to us, remains the same regardless of what is going on inside of us. We, as sinners, hold on to that unchanging Word by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and so are justified and saved. As a result, God achieves his most earnest purpose. God is our God and we are his people. Faith fulfills the First Commandment, and hence, all the commandments. Luther's theologizing is a continual improvisation to prevent any reading of Scripture that would obscure the pure promise that Jesus is and that would prevent that pure promise from being God's final Word to us. The "who" of who God is is inextricable from the "how" of how God achieves his most earnest purpose. God is deeply and completely human, a human Word—in other words, God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and as such is God's last word to human beings. In order to meet God as God really is, we must read the Scriptures in such a way that this human Word, who is Christ as sheer promise for sinners, is in fact God's last word to us; the order is *first* law, *then* gospel. The law is not a way to God at all. The law leaves us confined to this world, without God, and so hands us over to the God who wills to be for us only *within* this world, in the Word of promise, in the water of Baptism, in the bread and wine of the Supper. By faith in these external means, we are brought down to earth, under the cross, with no vision at all beyond it, whether of heaven or hell or purgatory, but living by the sheer promise that those who die with him in this way will also live with him.

Luther's catechisms are training in how to hear the Word of God so that it is the Word of *this* God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They teach us *how* to read the Scriptures, *how* to listen to a sermon, *how* to receive the Sacraments, *how* to follow Jesus. Unlike other catechisms, the order is law-gospel: *first* the Ten Commandments, *then* the Creed, *then* the Lord's Prayer and the Sacraments. They envision the church as a community of practice that continually exercises itself in this catechism because it gives the key to rightly hearing the narrative that forms the church community, the narrative in which the promise is the last Word to sinners trapped under the law, so that the community becomes a community of those who *both* fear *and* love God, and God achieves his most earnest purpose. There is no linear climbing way, but only a continual circling back to dying with Christ and beginning again to live by the hope of the resurrection. The Lord's Prayer expresses this continual circling back in repentance and faith, resting again in the certainty that all of God's promises are indeed for us, despite everything. The gospel is not about our becoming holy, but about God's becoming our God—that is, that *God* is our holiness.

1. This adopts the interpretation offered by Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 50–51.

The danger is to take Luther's and the Reformers' doctrinal improvisations as foundational for faith. We thereby turn them into a doctrinal system that prescribes a way of salvation in the sense of a method: *first*, we have to preach the law so that people are convicted of their sin, *then* we preach the gospel to comfort and uplift them, *and finally* we admonish them live a life of obedience to God. This is the caricature of law-gospel preaching that has often prevailed through much of the history of Lutheranism. This approach is wrong on multiple levels. For one thing, the situation has changed and Luther's improvisations won't work for most people anymore. A few persons who have been laboring under legalistic religious systems may respond with joy to Luther's announcement of the end of the law, but most people are not in that situation. More importantly, we fundamentally subvert the gospel by making it mere knowledge that we have at our disposal. The "what" as a foundation for the "who" and "how" is a betrayal of Christ. Any theology based on such a claim is not theology at all but is merely a rationale for control and power. The experience of Luther and the Reformers when they attempted to proclaim the gospel as the end of the law made this utterly clear. The church authorities, rightly feeling their power threatened, tried to stamp out the gospel with coercion and violence.

As such, the "how" question is crucial. As in Luther's time and also in ours, theology is for the care of souls. In Luther's time, the urgent question was how my soul can be united with its foundation. Today, the question is how I can get a soul at all. In our modern world, the soul is constantly being absorbed into the crowd. The media and the market manipulate us and reduce us to passivity. Those who still try to be souls, actual persons who act responsibly in the world, have no foundation on which to build other than their own feelings. They invest their faith in narratives of hope that they feel must be true, even though they know at some level that they cannot ground those narratives in anything beyond themselves. This situation forces Christians finally to recognize that their theologizing, too, is contingent, relative, and fallible. The test of its truth is not how closely it corresponds to a supposed foundation (a "what") but how well it works in making us persons, actual creaturely selves, who live by faith in the Person of Christ in whom we know the Father by the working of the Holy Spirit.

Though he did not and could not fully recognize it, Luther's theology in fact places us in an irremediable hermeneutical situation.[2] For him, the inextricable "who" and "how" of the church's discourse is prior to and foundational for the "what" of the church's assertions. Knowledge flows from faith. It is not the case that first we get knowledge, then come to agree with it, and ultimately come to trust in it, as in the traditional Protestant "way of salvation." The knowledge Christians claim, like all human knowledge, is contingent, relative, and fallible. It

2. The term is from Myron Penner, *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* (Baker Academic, 2013), 67.

is not the basis of faith but an outcome of faith. As finite creatures, we gain true knowledge of any sort by being members of communities of practice whose members have learned from experience that certain statements can be relied on. Such statements are true because they *work*, that is, they tend to open up a future for us rather than close it off. The church is no different in being a human community of interpretation and practice, just like any other community of interpretation and practice. In this community, we are trained to hear the narrative passed on to us in *this* particular way and have found that that this narrative, heard in *this* way, is true because it vouchsafes to us an *eternal future* that also opens up a future full of hope and love *in this life*. It proves itself true because it works. In the midst of the stresses and struggles of life, the gospel makes us mere creatures with no handle on the eternal but only a trust in the goodness of our Creator, which precisely thereby makes us persons or selves. The gospel is the power of God for salvation; God succeeds through the gospel in his most earnest purpose of being our God. When we practice theology in this way, we stand in continuity with Luther as well as all the witnesses to the truth of the gospel who went before him and who have come after him, and our theologizing can begin to enable a care of souls that leads to God fulfilling his most earnest purpose.

We must be grateful to Dr. Ngien for bringing us to the very heart of the matter in such a way that we can take up Luther's legacy and make it fruitful for contemporary proclamation of the gospel.

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Luther's Trinitarian Articulation in *God's Most Earnest Purpose*

Andrew L. Christiansen

Dennis Ngien's *God's Most Earnest Purpose: Luther on Fearing, Loving, and Trusting God* is a significant contribution to the appreciation of Martin Luther's theology. I emphasize the word *appreciation* because while Luther is widely recognized as a pivotal historical figure—and is of enduring interest to theologians, scholars of Lutheranism, and those working within ecumenical theology—his work is often under-appreciated for the breadth of its theological potential. In particular, Luther's extensive corpus offers rich resources for sustained reflection on God as Trinity in ways that can be meaningfully engaged. Ngien's book is an example of such meaningful engagement.

Ngien's book guides the reader through an exploration of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, following the same pattern found in Luther's own catechetical instruction; the tripartite structure of the *Large* and *Small Catechisms*. However, if asked to describe Ngien's work, I would hesitate to call it a commentary on Luther's catechisms. Rather, I see it more as a constructive theological engagement with these catechetical materials: Ngien moves through the same texts that Luther treated, drawing deeply on Luther's insights while not confining himself to them, instead situating the discussion within a broader conversation informed by a fairly wide range of theological voices– that nevertheless enhances an appreciation of Luther.

A primary aim of Ngien's work is to articulate how God relates to us—*us* as members of God's creation and as sinners whom God redeems. This relation is constituted by God's activity: God acts upon and toward us through the persons of the Trinity. The grammar of this trinitarian activity, Ngien observes, is given in the words of the Creed,[1] and the logic of this trinitarian grammar, he argues, undergirds Luther's theology as a whole. Ngien is thus interested in "how Luther applies trinitarian discourse to other theological themes."[2] This focus appears to stem from Ngien's desire not merely to illuminate a holistic character of Luther's theology, but also to give voice to Luther's pastoral sensibilities—for us. God is God *for us*, and Ngien asks how God is *for us* as Trinity.

In his review of Ngien's book, Jack D. Kilcrease writes, "Against those, like Karl Holl and Adolf von Harnack, who claimed that the Trinity was only marginal to Luther's thinking, Ngien is able to successfully show the centrality of the Trinity to Luther's concepts of salvation and the Christian life."[3] I concur with this assessment

1. Dennis Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose: Luther on Fearing, Trusting, and Loving God* with foreword by Graham Tomlin (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2026), 5.
2. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 5.
3. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose* [page A following the title page].

of Ngien's work (with a possible slight caveat I will return to shortly). Indeed, if one looks for instances of explicitly articulated "trinitarian grammar" in Luther's writings, these are relatively sparse. By this I mean that, at least at the level of formal discourse, the three persons of the Trinity do not always receive equal or symmetrical treatment in Luther's theology. It may be precisely this feature that has prompted various Lutheran theologians to emphasize the centrality of the Trinity in Luther's thought—particularly contemporary Lutheran theologians who have sought (and, I believe, successfully) to identify *pneumatology*, for instance, as a marrow running throughout the bones of Luther's theology. Such contemporary Lutheran theologians include Cheryl M. Peterson and Leopoldo Sánchez, to name only a few, both of whom inform Ngien's work.[4]

Of course, I think it is rather unfortunate that one would need to speak of a *recovery* of a trinitarianly-centered theology in Luther in the first place. If the readings of figures such as Holl and Harnack—whom Kilcrease rightly laments over—are indeed so misaligned with Luther's thought, then the remedy is simply to allow Luther to speak for himself. When we do so, we encounter a theologian who takes for granted that God *is* Trinity and that God works as Trinity. Luther assumes this so fully that his theology is unselfconsciously trinitarian: he thinks, speaks, writes, preaches, and proclaims on the basis of this conviction. Ngien seeks to show this.

Nevertheless, Harnack and Holl are by no means the only figures in the history of Luther interpretation who have been guilty of such misreadings. Harnack emerged from a century of liberal theology in which Luther interpretation, by and large, was methodologically underdeveloped and historiographically thin. Although Holl stood at the very threshold of a more historically attentive approach (and helped pioneer it), even his work did not yet fully provide Luther a proper hearing (but this is another story altogether). Reformation scholar Carter Lindberg traces the roots of these misreadings back as early as the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy (seventeenth-century). In the campaign of the Lutheran Orthodox scholastics to systematize doctrine with precision—an effort that I sympathize with, given the doctrinal crises of their context– Lindberg argues that the "proclamatory" language concerning justification, that one finds in Luther, gave way to a more "definitional" language contained in the Lutheran scholastics.[5] Of course, what is proclamatory is not necessarily opposed to what is definitional. In order to proclaim, there needs to be an understanding (i.e. definition) of what *is* proclaimed. What Lindberg helpfully identifies, however, is a potential downside of definitional neatness: it can subtly compartmentalize theological loci in a way that narrows their interconnections and

4. See Cheryl M. Peterson, "The Holy Spirit: Lutheran Perspectives," *The T&T Companion to Pneumatology*, ed. Daniel Castelo and Kenneth M. Loyer (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 197-205, and Leopoldo Sánchez, *Sculptor Spirit: Models of Sanctification from Spirit Christology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

5. Carter Lindberg, "Do Lutherans Shout Justification but Whisper Sanctification?" *Lutheran Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (1999): 5.

the attention they receive. In this sense, justification may become a clearly delimited topic within a doctrinal system rather than sharing the same dynamic reality as all the teachings of the faith (including sanctification).

This shift, even if unintended, contributed to a parsing of justification and sanctification in ways that neither Luther nor the first generation of Lutheran Reformers would have recognized. As Lindberg notes, "the emphasis on the identification of justification and sanctification in Luther's *Large Catechism*, the *Augsburg Confession*, and the *Apology* (to the *Augsburg Confession*) fades into the background," while Luther's insistence on the unity of forgiveness (justification) and the Christian life (sanctification) in the Third Article of the Creed (the pneumatological article!) loses its force.[6] If faith is a gift from the *Holy Spirit*, and it is by faith alone that we are justified, then justification and sanctification are deeply intertwined

Given this historical background, it seems not only appropriate but imperative for Lutheran theologians to undertake the theological task of allowing Luther to speak for himself on these matters. That said, there will inevitably be a degree of interpretation and systematization involved, particularly since Luther was often less explicit on this than some contemporary readers might wish. To be sure, Luther was not shy about formal discourse on the Spirit. Ngien rightfully points out how Luther identifies the cruciality of the Third Article by rhetorically calling it the "most important."[7] But it has been pointed out before how certain Luther scholars who have taken great interest in the respectable task in retrieving a trinitarian logic for Luther have not always used sound methods to demonstrate their otherwise compelling case.

To give an example of what I generally mean, one can refer to Robert Kolb's review of Christine Helmer's seminal work on this very topic *The Trinity and Martin Luther* regarding her method of using a stanza from Luther's hymn "Nun freut euch, lieben Christen gmein"—where the Holy Spirit is not actually mentioned nor formally treated– as an example of trinitarian logic. Kolb says:

> The argument for this interpretation is grounded largely on the placement of the hymn in the section of the Wittenberg hymnbooks of 1524 and 1519 on the Creed (thus, it must be explicitly trinitarian) and on sermons from the year of the hymn's composition that attribute the creation of the church—which is expressing its joy in the hymn's first stanza—to the Holy Spirit…. Unfortunately, this false foundation for the chapter undermines the appraisal of the Reformer's trinitarian teaching.[8]

However, although Kolb regards this as an argument from silence, he nevertheless observes that "the traditional explication of the hymn need not be set in oppo-

6. Lindberg, "Do Lutherans Shout Justification but Whisper Sanctification?" 5.

7. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 43, 44 & 152.

8. Kolb, review of Christine Helmer's *The Trinity and Martin Luther: A Study on the Relationship between Genre, Language, and the Trinity in Luther's Works (1523-1546)* in *Calvin Theological Journal* 36, no 1 (Apr 2001), 176.

sition to its presentation of elements of Luther's understanding of the Trinity."[9] I echo Kolb's judgment here. Lutheran theologians and Luther scholars, I suggest, are better served by treating Luther's theology as a sound foundation from which to develop trinitarian reflection in their own theological work, rather than attempting to uncover an implicit, self-conscious trinitarian logic beneath every text Luther produced. (For instance, Luther nowhere employs a term such as "Spirit Christology," although sound and compelling arguments, I believe, can certainly be made that Luther would agree with its constituent elements and that his theology would align with Leopoldo Sánchez's line of reasoning.)

And for this reason, I hesitate to see Ngien's book as a strict exposition of Luther's theology. To be fair, Ngien does not claim such a task for himself in his prefatory remarks. Returning, however, to Kilcrease's acknowledgement of the merit of Ngien's work, the "centrality of the Trinity to Luther's concepts of salvation and the Christian life" that Kilcrease sees as successfully demonstrated may not, in itself, require a project as ambitious as Ngien's in order to be established. That centrality, I would argue, is largely a given.

Of course, if by "the centrality of the Trinity" one means not merely the acceptance of the classically articulated doctrine of the Trinity as an essential Christian teaching—such that Christianity ceases to be Christianity without it—but rather the Trinity as a *methodological starting point* for the treatment of every doctrinal locus (or at least many), then demonstrating such a claim with respect to Luther would require more than Ngien provides here. It would necessitate a careful, and likely more historical analysis of Luther's writings.[10] Yet, as Ngien himself notes, he does not set out in this book to "trace the historical development and entirety of Luther's trinitarian theology…."[11] (Ngien also helpfully points to recent scholarship like that of Helmer's aforementioned work and Reiner Jansen's that do, in fact, undertake something much closer to this task.)

Nevertheless, what Ngien's book *does* offer is no less valuable for that reason. Its excellence should be recognized as that of a work of informed, imaginative, constructive, and, I believe, pastoral theology, one that seeks, in good Lutheran fashion, to present God *for us*. And one cannot speak Christianly of God being *for us*, or of God's relating to us at all, without acknowledging that God is Trinity.

The book is also well researched and can serve as a strong introduction to a more in-depth presentation of Luther's theology for intermediate-level readers in theology. I think this could even serve well as a basic course text for a graduate

9. Kolb, 176.

10. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 164. Ngien argues that one finds a logical order in Luther of how from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit, God does his work of grace. Ngien points us to Luther's commentary on John 3:13 (as in LW 22:332). But I don't see quite a method here in Luther as much as I see an explicit *Christological* statement–not explicitly involving the Spirit (although the Spirit's work is surely implicit).

11. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 5.

level introductory systematics course in a Lutheran context. By employing the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer as organizing frameworks, Ngien uses these catechetical materials as prompts for sustained and deep theological exploration—an exploration informed both by Luther's broader corpus and by engagement with theologians within and beyond the Lutheran tradition.

If this is Ngien's intention, it is carried out with clarity and care. If, however, one is seeking the uncovering of a previously unnoticed dimension of Luther's thought or the proposal of a novel interpretive thesis, I don't know if it is fair to say that this work would have any originality in that regard. (However, this book may be read as a helpful distillation—less dense in presentation yet no less rich in content—of what recent scholarship, such as Helmer and others, has sought to demonstrate regarding the importance of the Trinity for Luther.)

But then again, is this Ngien's intention? Although Ngien explicitly states that his book "does not try to trace the historical development and entirety of Luther's trinitarian theology,"[12] but instead seeks to show how Luther applies trinitarian discourse to themes such as creation, redemption, and sanctification, the precise aim of the work remains somewhat ambiguous. Possibly outside of the very careful reader, Ngien's introduction (indeed the very subtitle of this book: *Luther on Fearing, Trusting, and Loving God*) could lead one to see this book as an exposition of Luther. I think there is certainly a very helpful exposition of Luther throughout, but the book isn't in itself that. It also cites and refers to a wide range of theological voices. This book more so represents, I feel, *Ngien's voice* and an exposition ultimately of *his* reflections—which yes are informed by Luther, and are reflections Luther may very well agree with if he were around today. But I do think Ngien could have been more clear up front about this.

Nevertheless, whatever ambiguity may remain about the precise scope of the project, what emerges is unmistakably constructive and bears Ngien's own distinctive voice. One particular example of this appears in Ngien's use of a term that I have not come across before but which I find to be a helpful descriptor for the innate way in which human beings, as creatures, are designed for and drawn toward relationship with their Creator: *Godward-ness*. Ngien writes, "We are endowed with an orientation toward God. This *Godward-ness* is constitutive of our created nature; it is not ours by merits or rewards but is God's gift of grace."[13] Ngien helpfully employs this concept of Godward-ness as a remedy to the over-emphasis that some conventional views of Luther place on Luther's "low anthropology": God created a receptivity in us for himself that he uses to draw us to himself (but that *God* importantly activates). Drawing on Piotr J. Małysz's work and Luther's Genesis commentary, Ngien speaks of this Godward-ness as "original righteousness"—which of creation is distinctly in humans and consists in that humans were created to fear

12. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 5.

13. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 83.

and trust God, and important for worship and praise of God as a proper response to God.[14] This original righteousness though is part of original Creation, and thus is *reawakened* (passively) in God's *re-creating*. This aspect ties to Ngien's portrait throughout his book of how God's activity of creating is tied to his creative activity of redeeming. God is the agent of all his activities – not us. We are passive recipients of these actions all for *our* benefit—which is God's earnest purpose.

Here Ngien is particularly helpful in articulating, on the basis of Luther, a theology in which God's trinitarian actions toward humanity are foregrounded so that divine power is magnified and human beings are consistently portrayed as recipients rather than *doers* of these actions. This framing reinforces Ngien's broader emphasis that all aspects of divine activity—from creation to re-creation—are grounded in God's grace, not in human merit or capacity.

But this framing of God and man in their proper places nevertheless keeps in mind the crucial point that creation is connected *to* redemption and an acknowledgement that to be *truly human* is to be made for union with God. If this very premise is forgotten, we have an incomplete understanding of the works of God's love, mercy, and grace.

In underscoring the radical one-wayness of God's gift in Christ, and God making the sinner a 'new creation' from nothing and tying it to *creation ex nihilio*, I think Ngien makes a very helpful note in relation to the Creator-creature relationship. Creatures are corrupted by sin, but they are also God's creatures, "fearfully and wonderfully made." If there is a tendency to see Luther's anthropology one-sidedly—focusing on the fallenness of humanity—then Ngien rightfully counters that by his emphasis of *Godward-ness*; how humans possess an identity, he says, that "is derived from a loving creator, of whom they are completely dependent… our self-worth is derived from God's creative word."[15]

Ngien further draws out the emphasis on *Godward-ness* in his fifth chapter where he focuses on the Third Article of the Creed and the Holy Spirit. Here Ngien revisits the theme of the constitution of human beings for *receptivity of God* along with the "responsivity" to God that is lost through the Fall but restored by God's *re*-creating action. Here the Holy Spirit holds the "distinctive" role of causing our turning to God.[16] Ngien does well in this section to tie closer together the actions of God's justifying and God's sanctifying action—a unity tacitly undone post-Luther as previously mentioned. This was perhaps the section of Ngien's work that I found most helpful and illuminating, particularly in his focus on the mediating work of the Spirit in justification and sanctification. With respect to the latter, Ngien presents Luther as describing the Spirit's sanctifying activity in four dimensions: calling, enlightening, sanctifying, and preserving. Each of these aspects is, for the

14. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 84.

15. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 109.

16. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 155.

most part, helpfully developed. Yet here again we encounter the problem I noted earlier—namely, the possibility that Ngien is reading a more developed trinitarian framework into Luther than the sources can clearly sustain.

Does Luther himself explicitly attribute these as distinctive (though inseparable) actions to the third person of the Trinity? Luther's theology is often strongly Christological, and he frequently assigns to the Second Person actions that other theologians might treat as more distinctively pneumatological (while still affirming that such actions are common to the triune God). For example, Ngien cites Luther's *Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospel* regarding a person's encounter with Christ through Scripture, but Luther's language there is explicitly Christological and makes no direct reference to the Spirit as agent. Of course, we can presume that Luther understood the Spirit to be essential in this process, but if Ngien wishes to argue that Luther consciously approached these matters in a robustly trinitarian way, more passages in which Luther explicitly names the Spirit would strengthen the case.[17]

Nevertheless, Ngien's retrieval of *Godward-ness* is, in my judgment, a promising and fruitful avenue for contemporary Lutheran theology. The concept offers a way of affirming the radical passivity of the human creature before God while also preserving the theological insight that humanity is created *for* God—constituted for communion, trust, and praise

Returning to my previous comment about the aims of Ngien's work here and how I think it it can be best and most accurately described as a constructive theological project that places Luther in dialogue with modern trinitarian thought rather than a work *on Luther* per se, I could not help but notice that of all the modern and contemporary theological voices that Ngien engages, one emerges as having a rather strong influence, though perhaps more implicit than explicit—and that is Wolfhart Pannenberg; particularly in Pannenberg's conception of the Trinity. Although Ngien doesn't state it out right, I see Ngien's work as an intriguing synthesis in which Luther's catechetical material is read *through* a Pannenbergian framework, especially in his treatment of the three articles of the Creed.

My reasoning for this is found in the first chapter of the book. In Ngien's mention of Luther's interest in the *economic Trinity*, Ngien refers to Pannenberg's terminology of the economic Trinity as *differentiated unity*.[18] This means that the actions of God revealed to and known by humanity (*ad extra*) are actions that are "distinctive" to a particular person of the Trinity but importantly "not exclusive" to the person. Pannenberg in fact sees this as a crucial aspect of understanding the Trinity especially to properly distinguish Christianity from other faiths. As Pannenberg says,

> In our time of intense inter-religious discussion, Christians cannot compromise the truth that the trinitarian conception of God is not simply a Christian addition to a monotheism that we otherwise share with others.

17. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 159.

18. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 40.

> The Christian insistence is that God *as such* is to be understood as a differentiated unity. An *un* differentiated unity means unity opposed to the many. Unity that is opposed to the many presupposes and therefore is conditioned by that opposition. Precisely because that is a conditioned unity, it cannot be the absolute unity that is before and above the many. Only the triune God, as differentiated unity, is absolutely and unconditionally the one God. It follows that true monotheism is trinitarian.[19]

While he was a sincere ecumenical theologian, Pannenberg finds it imperative for the Christian theologian to distance themselves a kind of *philosophical monotheism* that is the premise for other world faiths– and not only some other world faiths but also versions of Christianity found in Christianity's own history that proceeded to *infer* a triune God from the doctrine of one God. In his *Systematic Theology*, Pannenberg sees such a method as fruitless. For Pannenberg, a systematic grounding for the doctrine of the Trinity must begin with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, just as the historical path to the construction of overall doctrine in Christian theology proceeds from the message and life of Jesus and the apostolic preaching about him found in Scripture.[20]

Pannenberg's decision to begin with the economic Trinity—God as revealed through his actions in history—requires careful attention to the scriptural witness. For Pannenberg, Scripture discloses how the teachings and ministry of Jesus make manifest the triune persons through their self-distinction. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each addressed and portrayed within Scripture, such that the apostolic witness, in a sense, as the data from which the epistemic (or economic) character of the triune persons– their distinct identities as revealed in their actions toward and upon us—can be discerned.

Ngien's appeal to Pannenberg's notion of the Trinity as a "differentiated unity" provides a conceptual grammar for describing the divine economy: trinitarian actions are distinctive but not exclusive to any one person. This framework shapes Ngien's entire exposition of the Creed, functioning less as a historical descriptor of Luther's method and more as a theological lens to engage Luther.

This becomes even clearer in Chapter Four, where Ngien turns to the Second Article of the Creed and focuses on the Son as the subject of redemptive action.

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19. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "God of the Philosophers," *First Things*, June 1, 2007, accessed February 9, 2026, https://firstthings.com/002-god-of-the-philosophers/

20. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapid, MI: Eerdmans, 1991-1998). He treats the Trinity specifically in chapters 5 and 6. Importantly, unlike Karl Barth, this is the building of the doctrine of the Trinity based on the revelation of God as it is *materially* attested in the biblical writings. Like Pannenberg, Barth also believed that a doctrine of the Trinity must begin with the Trinity as given in revelation, not metaphysical reasoning. But Pannenberg saw Barth as deriving the doctrine "from the formal concept of a self-revealing God" (Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 303). In Pannenberg's view, Barth "did not develop the trinitarian statements out of the contents of the revelation to which scripture bears witness (to)..." (Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 303).

His claim that the Father is the subject of creative action and the Son of redemptive action is immediately qualified by the insistence that Father and Son share a common being and purpose, again invoking the logic of differentiated unity. The Son's distinctive role is framed in terms of the downward and upward movement of salvation: God comes to humanity in Christ, and humanity returns to God clothed in Christ's righteousness. Here Ngien's reliance on a Christology-from-below (explicitly resonant with Pannenberg) is especially pronounced.

Seen in this light, I would be curious to see Ngien further explore a more explicitly framed constructive theological proposal that brings Luther into conversation with Pannenberg's trinitarian theology. *God's Most Earnest Purpose* appears to have Pannenberg's trinitarian theology as a sort of guiding framework. Pannenberg's trinitarian framework, with its emphasis on the Spirit's role in history and the economy of salvation, finds, I believe, a compatibility with Luther, and may even help flesh out the implicitly presupposed work of the Spirit in Luther's work. *God's Most Earnest Purpose* begins to prove this. I'd love to see a more overt engagement with Pannenberg as a theological interlocutor as Ngien's work shows that Pannenberg's theology, at least on this front, can be a basis for Luther's theology on the Trinity to be fruitfully interpreted.

I'd like to conclude my engagement with Ngien's work with a quotation that Ngien features on page 209 from the late Robert Jenson,

> Christians dare address God, however others may do it, only because Jesus permits them to join his prayer, appropriating his unique filial term of address and relying on his fellowship in the prayer. We pray to "our Father." We pray with the one who, by uniquely addressing God as "my Father," makes himself the Son, and us as his adoptive siblings children, of his Father. Just so, we enter into the living personal community between them, that is, we pray to the Father, with the Son, in the Spirit.[21]

I believe Jenson's words here help to demonstrate that Lutheran theologians have in Luther, someone who gives a theology one can build upon to further explicate the trinitarian logic. Ngien does this wonderfully in his book. This book is not only a tribute to Luther and his insights in this way, but a tribute to, as I believe Luther would hope for, *God*. This book demonstrates the work of God's very Spirit in God's own illumining of mind and heart through the many voices engaged in the biblically-informed efforts to appreciate more deeply God's gracious actions (and purpose) for us which we encounter through all three persons of the Trinity. *Sola Deo Gloria*.

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21. Robert W. Jenson, "The Triune God," *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 1997), 37, as found in Ngien, God's Most Earnest Purpose, 209.

The God Who Gives Himself Wholly…

Erik H. Herrmann

A friend and former colleague of mine often ruffled feathers by regularly dropping Nietzsche into faculty discussions—like a teetotaler crashing a wine tasting event. We were all having fun "doing theology," and then Joel would bring up the "death of God" and repeatedly ask us "Why?" or some such annoyance. He was right, of course, and even though we knew that the collective IQ of the room doubled when he entered, we still wished he would stop nagging us about "highest values" being devalued.

Joel's concern was the effect of what the philosopher James Edwards called "normal nihilism" on Christian faith, witness, and life.[1] "Normal nihilism" is the modern condition that all of us tend to operate with when what had previously functioned as the *highest* values (by which all other values found their structure and meaning) becomes just *another* value, something to be appraised and haggled over in the flea-market of ideas. "God," "salvation," "creation," and "eternity" were all examples of such highest values: "They define; they constitute. They are absolute; they are sublime. They are not explained, because they explain everything else."[2]

Now, however, they are "devalued"—measured by their general usefulness to the individual or communities, and often the price is pretty cheap: "God is like someone who is always there for you, I don't know, it's like God is God. He's just somebody that'll always help you go through whatever you're going through."[3] Charles Baudelaire (1821-1861) put it more provocatively: "God is the sole being who has no need to exist in order to reign.… The most prostitute of all beings is the Supreme Being, God Himself, since for each man he is the friend above all others; since he is the common, inexhaustible fount of Love."[4] In this context, traditional doctrines can remain but only as "vestiges," no longer carrying the weight they once did. Christians often don't know why they believe in such doctrines as the

1. Joel P. Okamoto, "When Salt Loses Its Saltiness: Nihilism and the Contemporary Church" in *Concordia Journal* 44/4 (2018): 33-50. See also James C. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism* (Penn State University Press, 1997).

2. Ibid., 40.

3. Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 164.

4. Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (City Lights, 1983), 21, 74, cited by Okamoto, "When Salt Loses Its Saltiness," 38.

Trinity or creation, even though they retain them, nor can they adequately explain their importance or role.[5]

Dennis Ngien's new book on Luther, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, is not about "normal nihilism" or intentionally oriented to address it, so why bring it up in a review? What Ngien does instead is exhibit how doctrine functions when the highest values continue to exert their comprehensive explanatory power over theology. Ngien's book offers a fulsome account of Luther's theology as it is shaped by the Doctrine of the Trinity and of creation *ex nihilo*. In this, we are given a beautiful example of how theology unfolds from its foundational Christian assumptions before these assumptions were excavated in modernity and "cornerstones" were made to become "stumbling blocks" again.

Ngien's approach is to give the Doctrine of the Trinity its full force in Luther's own recentering of justification as he expresses it in the catechetical framework of the Decalogue, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. Like a red thread running through a tapestry, Ngien continually invokes the doctrine of creation "out of nothing" (*ex nihilo*) as an image and fountainhead of *grace*. God's creation *ex nihilo* asserts that God creates with absolute *freedom*, without inner or external necessity, but it also means that creation is an act of perfect and unqualified *generosity*. This is not simply a proposition about the primordial past or the ontology of God and the world; it characterizes and colors everything in theology. God who is "wholly other" is nevertheless the God who gives himself wholly for what he has freely made. As Luther said, it is his "most earnest purpose" to be our God: "the Father gives us all creation, Christ all his works, the Holy Spirit all his gifts."

What Ngien does very well is let Luther's writings echo and bounce off each other as the theme unfolds. He is not presenting us with a comprehensive development of Luther's theology of the Trinity. Instead, he urges us to see again and again the trinitarian coherence of Luther's distinctive emphases in theology, especially his doctrine of justification. It is a constructive picture, and Ngien brings the various brushstrokes of contemporary scholars to embellish it. Again, Ngien is less interested in carving out a distinctive thesis over against secondary literature as he is in presenting a sustained and coherent narrative of how Luther's theology does not just assume the doctrine of the Trinity but is structurally and existentially shaped by trinitarian themes. The scholarly voices are like a catena, linking and strengthening the picture, but no one scholar seems to get the upper hand over the voice of Luther himself.

5. Okamoto, "When Salt Loses its Saltiness," 44: "The vestigial status of the doctrine of the Trinity shows because most Christians cannot explain why it was appropriate for the word to become flesh, not the Father nor the Spirit, or why a theology of the word, including the Scriptures, should begin with the personal word of God, not the Spirit. For that matter—and this all the more confirms matters—they cannot even understand what they are being asked."

Along the way, one can still observe that Ngien does favor some interpretations of Luther over others. One detects the strong forensic view of justification championed by Gerhard Forde throughout rather than the more ontic interpretation of the Finnish school. Likewise, Oswald Bayer's emphasis on the efficacy of divine speech as a creative act finds a ready home here. However, Ngien places these in service to the larger Trinitarian focus in which participation in the divine life is central, though as a relational concept rather than an ontological one. Ngien seems to be less comfortable with placing Luther in conversation with the monastic/mystical tradition that one sees in the works of Bernd Hamm and Volker Leppin, though it is not obvious that making such connections to the elements of mystical theology that informed Luther's thought would jeopardize the project.

In the end, *God's Most Earnest Purpose* gives us a robust experience of Luther's thought. With a second naiveté, I found myself saying, "So this is what it can look like when we believe that the God who saves me is triune, when redemption from sin and death is grace from beginning to end, and when life with God is a pouring out of the creator's love in Christ and a gathering back into communion with God and one another." Ngien helps us observe and perhaps pine for a theology that moves from "faith to faith"—from belief in the *truth* of divine things, to the "living, busy, active" faith that lives *truthfully*. Perhaps God creating *ex nihilo* is precisely what we need in our day of "normal nihilism."

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