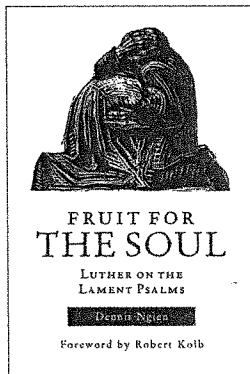


REVIEWS

"It is not many books that make men learned . . . but it is a good book frequently read."

Martin Luther



Fruit for the Soul: Luther on the Lament Psalms. By Dennis Ngien. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015.

Luther deeply imbibed the language of the Psalms. From his days as a friar, Luther was immersed in the Scriptures and especially the Psalter, which would be prayed from beginning to end each week. Through his experiences as an Augustinian friar, Luther gained much of the vocabulary

that he would employ in the struggles of the Reformation. At the same time, the Psalms do not merely provide grist for his theological expressions, they also form and shape the very way Luther grew to understand God and man: man as sinner and condemned, and God as justifier of the wicked. Only with this proper view of theology could Luther find comfort for his beaten and worried soul. Luther draws this comfort out of the Psalms for all to hear and benefit from.

Dennis Ngien unfolds Luther's remarkable insights into the lament psalms in his work *Fruit for the Soul: Luther on the Lament Psalms*. By examining each psalm in turn, and carefully exhibiting what Luther says, Ngien gives the reader a fine introduction to the riches of mercy that flow from Christ. Particularly in our day, as the practice and benefit of proper lament has fallen away, it is appropriate that Ngien sets before us Luther's own words concerning the use and blessing of God's word put forward for us. The refreshment gained from this neglected aspect of Scripture strikes the reader as new, but also familiar, because of Luther's coherent theology.

Psalms 6, the first of the lament psalms, encourages the believer to face the gravity of his sin but to the end that he might be relieved by the gospel. Philosophers wonder about and expound upon the nature of the good life, and to many it appears that the good life is one lived without pain, or struggle, or torment. However, that ideal is not the actual experience of most people, and in this life such an ideal is not beneficial for man. Instead, it is precisely that which we most despise and avoid, lament and sorrow, that characterize the good life. This is because God hears those who cry to him with a broken spirit, confessing their trust that he alone is their help in times of trouble. God in his alien work, the work of the law, "established

and revealed" his proper work of forgiveness and renewal (21). Those who rely on themselves are smug: they feel no need to be delivered from their evil estate. The theme of smugness appears again and again as it serves to illustrate the unbelieving heart.

The unregenerate mind does not understand spiritual things. Thus it is no surprise that those outside of the church misunderstand the church and what the church offers in her confession of Christ. One example is the belief that Christians are those who are "holier than thou," who revel in their moral superiority over regular people who simply live their lives as best they can. This view fails to understand what the church teaches concerning sin and grace. Luther is clear in his practical view of the center point of theology, that man is rightfully condemned as sinner, but God is merciful and the justifier of the wicked. Psalm 51 captures the idea that "[t]heology has no other theme than this: warped sinners but wrapped 'in the bosom of God who is grace'"(27). Knowledge of sin causes a feeling of divine wrath, an experience of hell. Yet from that lowly state God is called upon in his mercy for forgiveness, and he hears and answers. David does not call upon God in his hiddenness, but as he has revealed himself in mercy and blessing.

Central to the early modern philosopher René Descartes is the thinking self. He famously concluded, *cogito ergo sum* ("I think therefore I am"). In contrast to the image of the thinking man who grounds his being within himself, Ngien argues that Luther found that the Psalmist directed his thoughts outward to the promises of God. Luther drew a distinction between thinking and meditation (90). Thinking, according to Luther, seems to be something that even animals can do. This interpretation of thought deals with appearances, and with reaction to simple observation. Meditation is deeper, and it belongs solely to rational creatures. Meditation is related to delight, a rumination of the heart that rejoices in its object. Meditation is formative for habit as it leads to action.

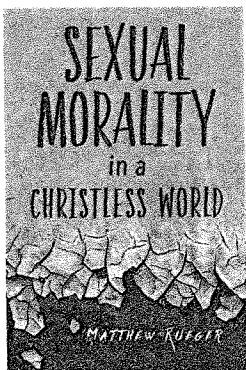
The flip side of delighting in something is despising it. To despise something is not simply the internal feeling of hatred but also concerns how something is outwardly treated. Thus, one who skims over or disregards the word of God despises it. He does not allow the word to have full say in his life or to have full force in shaping his character. The state where an individual is fully confronted by the depth of his own sin and the disdain of God is not natural. The ability to see one's state

as a sinner is not an act of conscience but a gift of God (156). Luther emphasized that the will of man before conversion does not prepare itself to receive grace but instead struggles against God. Salvation is wholly an act of God, through and through.

Ngien shifts to consider Psalm 90, which presents Moses in his full strength as a minister of death. Ngien summarizes by writing, "Moses' peculiar aim was to put the arrogant and unbelieving despisers of God under the law and set squarely before their own eyes the horrible reality of their sad condition" (159). Preachers wish to remind their hearers that they will not live forever. That delusion is removed so that the hearer will rely on God alone who is their refuge, even from death.

Ngien does a fine job situating what Luther says in the context of theological discourse with the reader. Luther shows that the Psalms are not only the words of man in prayer but are primarily God's word to the sinner as law and gospel. Ngien effortlessly weaves in and out of the Psalms, Luther, and other influential theologians in order to better show the value of the lament psalms for the contemporary Christian. With this introduction the reader is prepared to appropriate for himself the language that gives shape to a real faith that does not back away from God in times of trouble but is prepared, even to the point of death, to trust in the God who has proven himself to be merciful and trustworthy.

Kevin Belter
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Sexual Morality in a Christless World. By Matthew Rueger. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016.

It has become a somewhat common practice among Christians today to draw analogies between our century and modern culture and that of the Ante-Nicene culture, and,

more precisely, the first century Greco-Roman world. As we witness firsthand Western civilization undergoing a dramatic cultural shift in which marriage is being redefined, homosexuality has been accepted as normal, men are permitted to share bathrooms with young girls, and polygamy, pedophilia, transgenderism, and incest are also moving closer to acceptance and normalcy, pastor Matt Rueger offers an historical perspective on Christian sexual morality. Rueger's goal is to show how Christians, who were seen as "outcasts and radicals" (8), brought their newfound sexual morality, rooted in the gospel and God's plan for human sexuality, and upended the ancient pagan Roman world with messages of agape love, sexual chastity and purity, and marital fidelity. In writing this book, Rueger's concern is for Christians today, who are increasingly finding themselves in the position of Christians

in St. Paul's day as outcasts and radicals, to be willing, without fear, to stand out in the crowd and oppose the increasing amoral, pagan, and dehumanizing messages of our day as did the Christians centuries ago. Rueger's main concern, however, is more with the younger generation who are on the front lines dealing with issues in schools and other venues. He states, "Before they can make such a stand and present a clear case for their position, they need to know why as Christians their morality is God pleasing and why they need not be ashamed to speak about it in public" (8-9). Rueger himself speaks publicly about these issues, as he, rather surprisingly, was invited to speak at Iowa State University by one of its professors, in the spirit of academic freedom, to present a "conservative" side of sexual ethics to an eclectic undergraduate class for debate. These lectures provided the foundation for this book.

According to Rueger, one of the main themes found in the New Testament is that of emperor worship. Early Christians found themselves in the position of having to choose between worshipping Jesus and worshipping the Caesars. From Caesar Augustus to Nero, Rueger documents a clear picture of how open and sanctioned immoral behavior was in the lives of its leaders: "A culture of promiscuity produced leaders who were promiscuous, which furthered the agenda of sexual immorality, which led to leaders who were even more immoral. It was a vicious circle. . . . [T]he sexual immorality of Rome was part of a much greater objectification of human beings" (26). Roman sexual practices were diverse and ranged from the Greek influence of pederasty to rape, adultery, prostitution, pedophilia, and homosexuality. While the description and consideration of such activities in this book might be upsetting to some, Rueger pulls no punches in trying to describe modern-day culture in similar terms. Indeed, it may be hard for the modern reader to appreciate the nature and risk that Christians faced by challenging the morality of the Caesars. It put the Christians at risk of death, not just unpopularity, as the heart of Roman society was attacked. To oppose Caesar was to oppose Rome itself (34). Rueger makes the important comparison to American society today: "Moral plurality has become a mark of patriotism. To insist that Christian sexual morality is better or more God-pleasing than other views is seen as an attack on the very fabric of our culture" (34). Christians, however, responded to this pagan, hedonistic avarice with love and care for those around them. They placed sex within the context of marital love and fidelity. They denounced sex as something to satisfy one's own desires. Christians practiced a "new morality" because they were forgiven in Christ. In dealing with each other and the broader culture, Christians learned to live under grace, or as the author describes, "Christians saw each other's maleness or femaleness in terms of their joint relationship to Christ. . . . They saw their sexual relationship as an expression of self-emptying love and fidelity in the image of the Savior, whose single-minded devotion to them led Him to sacrifice His life on their behalf" (57).

The great beauty of this book is Rueger's emphasis on the gospel to motivate and change lives. The higher purpose of