Everybody counts. Even the Lollards.

A counting book that retells Jesus' parables and a Reformation-themed alphabet book are among my favorite new children's books.

by Elizabeth Palmer

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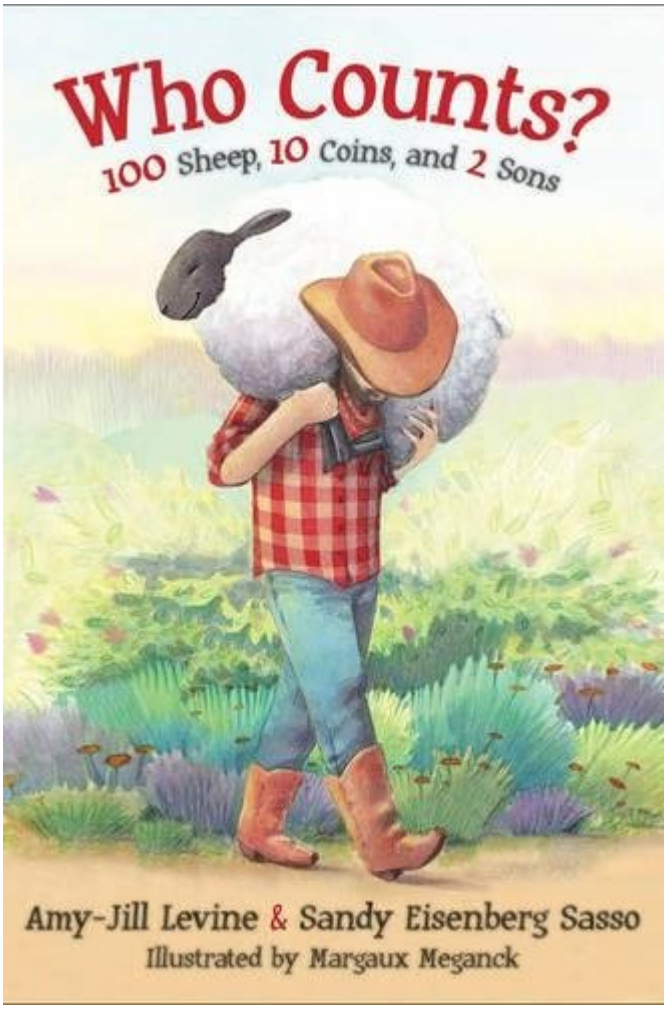
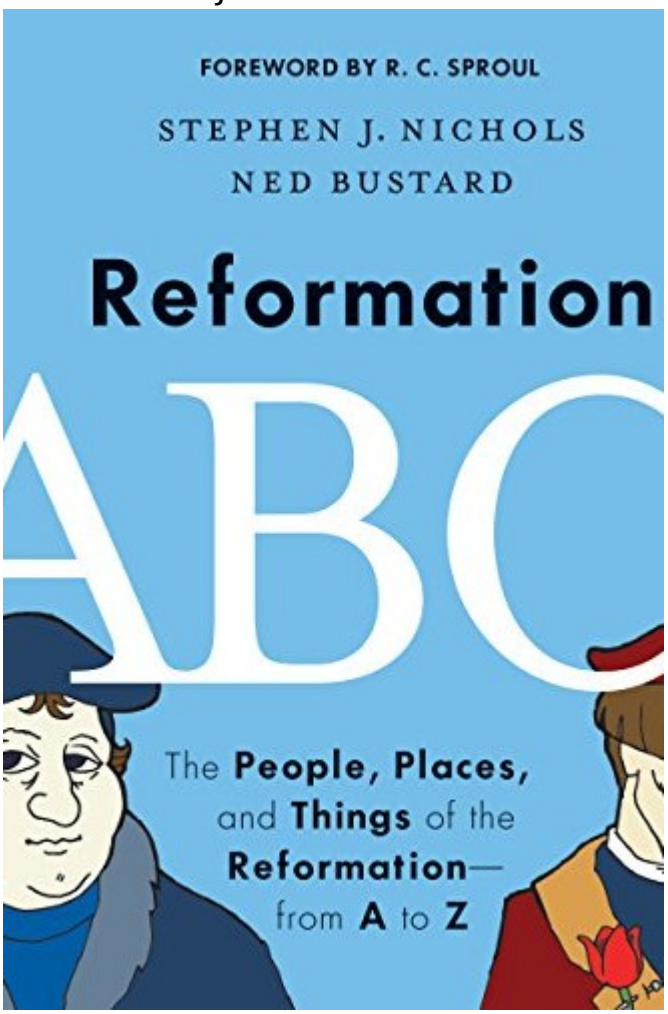
In Review



Who Counts?

100 Sheep, 10 Coins, and 2 Sons

by Amy-Jill Levine and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, illustrated by Margaux Meganck
Westminster John Knox Press



Reformation ABCs

The People, Places, and Things of the Reformation—from A to Z

by Stephen J. Nichols, illustrated by Ned Bustard
Crossway Publishing

There’s no shortage of picture books based on Luke’s account of the lost sheep, lost coin, and prodigal son. But Amy-Jill Levine and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso’s may be the

first one to include a note to parents warning against the subtle anti-Jewish messages that often attend allegorical readings of these parables. The traditional Christian reading of the parables as an allegory for repentance and forgiveness risks portraying the God of Christianity as more merciful and loving than the God of Judaism. Further, the authors explain, such an allegorical reading would have been foreign to the original audience:

> That audience would not think that the man who lost his sheep, the woman who lost her coin, or the father who lost his older son were symbols for God. This is because God doesn't lose us. Nor would they think of the sheep and the coin as examples of repenting, because sheep and coins don't repent. In our reading, the three stories are connected. The first two stories set up the third. The main message is about counting, searching for what is missing, and celebrating becoming whole again.

Levine and Sasso's simple prose, set alongside Margaux Meganck's culturally-sensitive illustrations, creates an expansive vision in which everybody counts. From sheep to coins to human beings, the message is that it's worth searching for those who are lost. After carrying the exhausted lost sheep home on his shoulders, the man smiles and comments, "One sheep makes a difference. Without her, something is missing. Now my flock is complete." Similarly, when the prodigal son's father realizes that he has "discounted" his older son, he says "I love you" and asks him to join the party. "Without you," he admits, "something is missing. With you, our family is complete."

Adult readers may wonder how history would have been different if Christians had consistently said those same words to their brothers and sisters of every nationality, race, income bracket, and faith tradition. What if we were to live and work and vote and preach with the conviction that everybody counts?

In Stephen J. Nichols's new Reformation-themed alphabet book, everybody does count. Not surprisingly, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli each get their own page. But so do John Bunyan, James Ussher, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and the Lollards. This democratic treatment of the personalities and places of the Reformation, combined with the restraint of presenting them in alphabetical order, means that the book reads more like a compendium than a history. So, for example, readers learn on the "D is for dig, dog, and Dürer" page that "When Albrecht heard

Luther had to appear before the Diet of Worms, he was distressed." But only much later, on the "M is for monkey, moon, and Martin the Monk" page, do readers learn that "Martin didn't have to eat worms. A diet was a meeting and Worms was a city."

Ned Bustard's vivid illustrations help create a sense of continuity across the narrative, as the story that unfolds is richly complex. The theology behind it, though, is simple: "God loves us, even though our sin makes us not so lovely."

Although this book is marketed for 8-12 year olds, I plan to read it to my 6-year-old daughter. My child may have a higher tolerance for theological discourse than most kindergarteners, but Nichols so seamlessly distills the gospel into accessible terms that I suspect I won't be the only parent to find his prose fitting for younger children. (I will, however, edit out a few phrases, like "satisfied God's wrath," "paid for our sins with his own precious blood," "yielded their bodies to be burned, and "fifty thousand have been slaughtered in France in the space of eight or ten days.")

What I appreciate most about this book is the way it intentionally draws children into the story of God's grace. After quoting the beginning of the Westminster Catechism, Nichols writes, "Whether you are a pastor, a king, a soldier, a poet, an artist, or a scientist—whatever you do—you can do everything glorifying and enjoying God forever." Readers turn the page to find "Y is for yellow, yodeling, and you," which ends with this commission:

> For centuries God has given the church Reformers. You are the next Reformer. You don't have to yawn through life wondering what your purpose is. The Reformation was five hundred years ago. We need to tell the great stories of it so we never forget God's faithfulness. We also need to live our own stories. What story will you live?

In other words, *semper reformanda.*