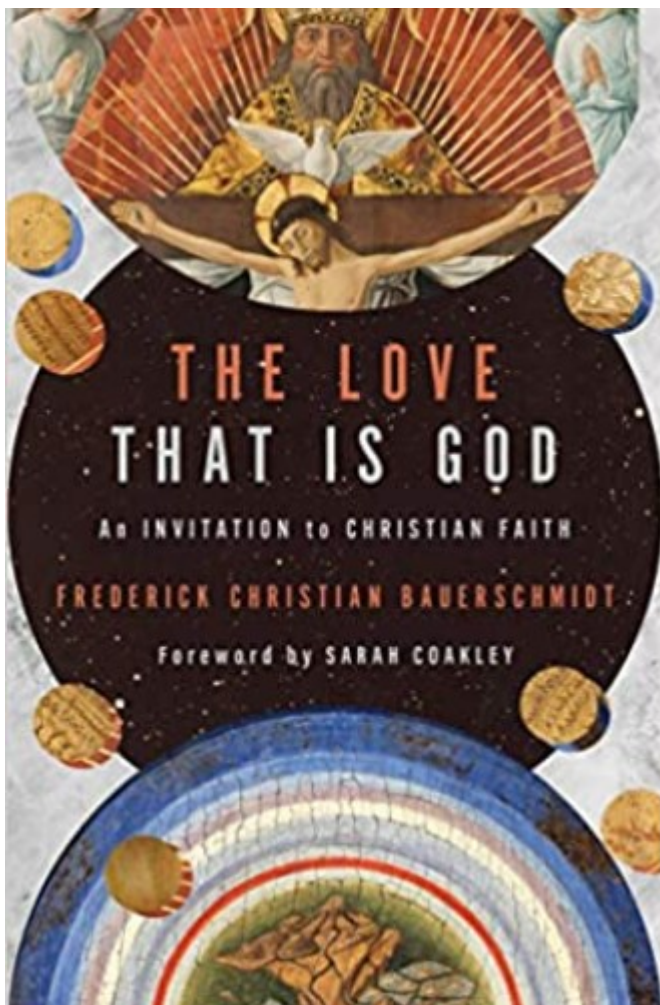


Take & Read: Theology

## Four new books that are shaping theological conversations

selected by [Jason Micheli](#) in the [May 19, 2021](#) issue

### In Review



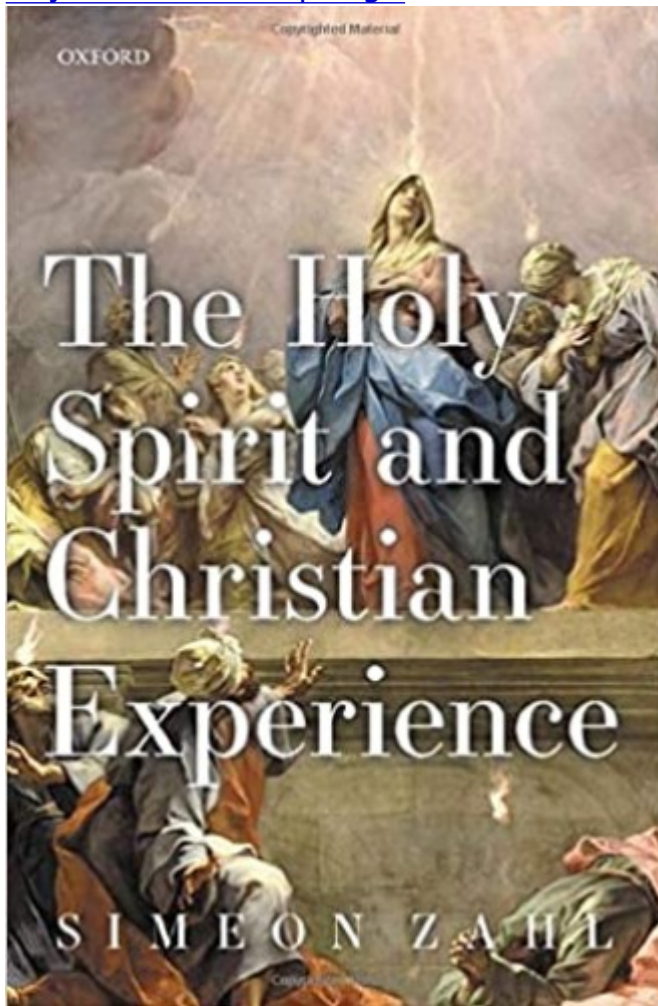
### The Love That Is God

An Invitation to Christian Faith

by Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt

Eerdmans

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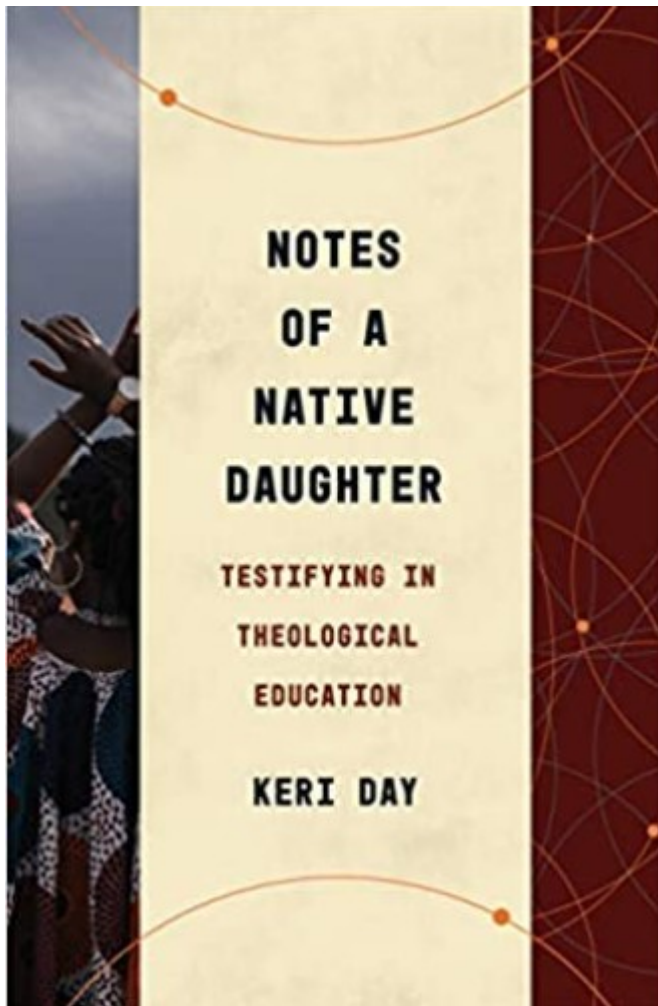


## **The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience**

by Simeon Zahl

Oxford University Press

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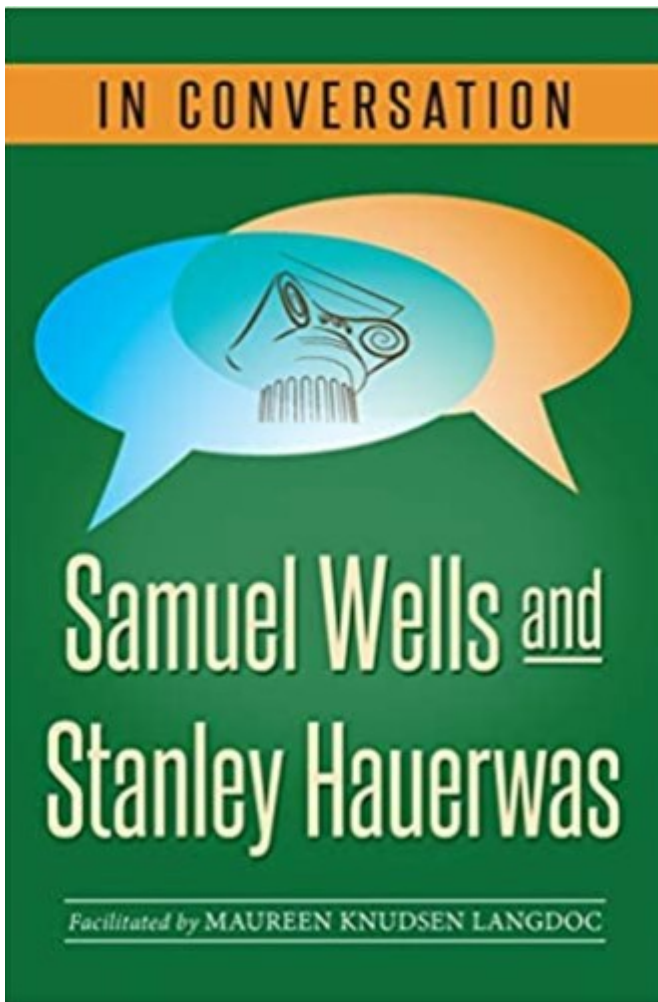
## **Notes of a Native Daughter**

Testifying in Theological Education

by Keri Day

Eerdmans

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## **In Conversation**

Samuel Wells and Stanley Hauerwas

facilitated by Maureen Knudsen

Church Publishing

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The past year has exposed the fragility of life and the denial of death, the depth of cultural antagonisms and the entrenchment of its tribes, the persistence of America's original sin and the conundrum of how the church is to be Christ's body when actual bodies are kept at a safe remove. These realities force upon the church a broad and disconcerting question: What is Christianity all about?

What Christianity is all about and how we can live as if our lives depend upon it are the questions Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt dares to address in his beautiful

primer, ***The Love That Is God: An Invitation to Christian Faith*** (Eerdmans). In conversation with voices as diverse as Augustine and Pope Benedict, Martin Luther King Jr. and Friedrich Nietzsche, Julian of Norwich and Ignacio Ellacuría, Bauerschmidt reflects on five truths: God is love, the love that is God is crucified love, we are called to friendship with the risen Jesus, we cannot love God if we do not love each other, and we live out our love from the community created by the Spirit.

Bauerschmidt's spare, poetic prose not only buttresses the alluring intent of his subtitle but also reinforces his thesis that the radical claim of the gospel is, at bottom, a simple aesthetic assertion: God is love, *crucified* love. "What Christianity is about must be something more than a collection of beliefs and behaviors; it must be a mystery that sinks its roots into the heart of life itself. This mystery, however, is mysterious not because it is complicated, but because it is so simple."

*The Love That Is God* is something like a theological version of Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*: it teaches by example how to write for the cause of the gospel. Bauerschmidt expresses the gratuity of creation ex nihilo in these words: "If . . . what it means for us to love someone or something is to say 'I am glad you exist,' then what it means for God to love us is for God to say, 'Because I am glad, you exist.'"

Although Bauerschmidt is a Catholic deacon, this book eludes characterization as Catholic or Protestant. It is also neither progressive nor conservative. A persuasive account of Christian faith that resists classification into the culture's categories, it models how to communicate that faith broadly and generously in a context that is as divided as it is secular.

If Christianity is about our relationship with a real and living person, then it is insufficient for theology to provide elegant descriptions of God or salvation while ignoring how these ideas might feel in relation to the everyday realities of life. In ***The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*** (Oxford University Press), Simeon Zahl confronts a question of foundational significance: "How is it," he writes, "that meaningful and effectual connections come to obtain between theological doctrines and the practical experiences of Christians?" These connections are what clergy are alluding to when they say, "That'll preach!"

Zahl mounts a dynamic, cross-disciplinary exploration of why some doctrines “preach” to the hearts of believers, gleaning insights from Augustine to Luther to queer studies to affect theory. He imparts a helpful corrective to the suspicious posture from which modern theology, following Karl Barth, regards subjective experience. Not only are theological doctrines the product of particular cultural contexts and historical periods, they are also inextricable from “our feelings, our moods, our predispositions, and the personal histories we carry with us.” Our life experiences not only shape our beliefs, our beliefs are the products of our experience of God, “concrete experiences of God’s Spirit in history.”

Talk of experience is an inescapable outcome of a living and loquacious God. Zahl unfurls an affective hermeneutic that not only provides an intelligible and necessary place for *feeling* in Christian theology but makes a convincing case for why Christianity itself is emotionally intelligent. “To speak of experience,” Zahl contends, “is to speak of the Holy Spirit.”

The experiential realm provides Zahl a motif by which to examine the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation and sanctification. He shows how social science corroborates Luther’s understanding of how law and gospel are applied to a sinner. The reason the message of justification still preaches is backed up by critical theory: rather than outdated relics from a guilt-ridden, God-haunted past, the doctrines of the Reformation provide an “affective pedagogy” in which the Holy Spirit works in the felt experiences of hearers through the instruments of law and gospel.

After a year in which much of the church’s ministry has been shelved and many of its members made anxious, angry, and frightened, Zahl delivers the glad news that what the church can still do in any circumstance—proclaim God’s grace for sinners—is good medicine for troubled souls. It’s also good news in a time of pandemic that our emotions are not ancillary to our theology. They are the terrain on which the Holy Spirit acts.

That our experiences shape our beliefs makes it doubly important that we attend to the experiences of others. We cannot befriend Jesus without loving his friends. But friendships require forgiveness, and forgiveness is, as Bauerschmidt puts it, “the most attractive and most repellent aspect of Christianity.” Keri Day, in ***Notes of a Native Daughter: Testifying in Theological Education*** (Eerdmans), demonstrates the hard work of repentance that forgiveness requires. “I call theological education to repentance,” she writes frankly, “by being truthful about

the racist character of the theological enterprise even in the midst of its growing racially diverse landscape.”

Day’s Black Pentecostal faith, which she describes as “visceral and verbal, emotional and demonstrative,” shapes the book’s form and voice. The purpose of testimony, she notes, is to bear witness to an adversity overcome by the power of the Spirit. *Notes of a Native Daughter* is a searing theological critique that aims to uncover and exorcise theological education’s colonialist impulses and their enabling myths. “Theological schools must wrestle continually with the emotional carnage left in the wake of institutional racial disenfranchisement,” she writes.

The practice of testimony “forged a truly democratic community” in the congregations of Day’s youth, and it offers an imaginative alternative to the model that has been sacrosanct in seminaries and divinity schools for generations. A school that wants to move marginalized students from the periphery to the center of its curricular concerns must listen to their testimonies, relying on them as reliable witnesses to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Theology that has no room for subjective experience and emotion is also theology that has had no room for the full breadth of Christ’s body.

Testimony is not sentimental, says Day; it “involves telling truths about hard matters.” Day tells some difficult truths. She testifies to her struggle as a Pentecostal Black woman to “pass” in the academy. She testifies to the long history of racism in which institutions—including Princeton Theological Seminary, where she teaches—have participated. And she honors her readers enough not to pull any punches:

While the poor are mentioned in the liturgy and theological proclamations of white and black liberal communities, the poor are rarely invited into such communities to speak and to participate fully in the common life of the congregation. How can liberal communities truly be in the vanguard against poverty if they have a hard time sitting next to homeless people on Sunday morning?

Day aims at “a theology of the edge” that not only acknowledges the humanity of marginalized people but also gathers them “to participate in authentic community.”

The way Day's call for repentance serves a broader redemptive hope models how congregations might engage current dialogues on systemic racism and collective sin. "I testify to the complexities and contradictions of the past and present," Day writes, in order to "testify to what futures might be on the horizon." This book offers a distinctly theological but unabashedly hopeful way for readers to confront questions and issues that the past year has thrown into sharp relief.

The church is a necessary element of the essence of Christianity, which perhaps makes it problematic that theology is so often a solitary endeavor. ***In***

***Conversation: Samuel Wells and Stanley Hauerwas*** (Church Publishing)

inadvertently reveals the extent to which most theology is monological as much as it is monochromatic. If the love that is God is Trinity, the work of theology should more frequently resemble these ten conversations between two practitioners as they discuss, disagree, respond to, and build upon the contributions of each other. More important than the topics of these conversations is their tone. "If you believe that Christ through the forgiveness of sins has healed the past," Wells says to Hauerwas, "and through the gift of eternal life has turned the future from a threat to a gift, then you can for the first and only time live in the present."

This freedom to be present in the present imbues *In Conversation* with winsomeness, the gracious mirth of two conversation partners who feel free to dissent and clarify without fear of judgment or anxiety that it's up to them to get it all right. At a time when basic civility feels like a mirage, Hauerwas and Wells stage a sort of intervention to compel us to do Christianity in a healthier way. While their friendship no doubt makes the patient, playful mode of their conversations possible, Bauerschmidt would remind us that all of us who love the risen Jesus already have been made friends with one another.