

Take & Read: Theology

Five new books that address today's theological challenges

by [Jason Micheli](#) in the [May 18, 2022](#) issue

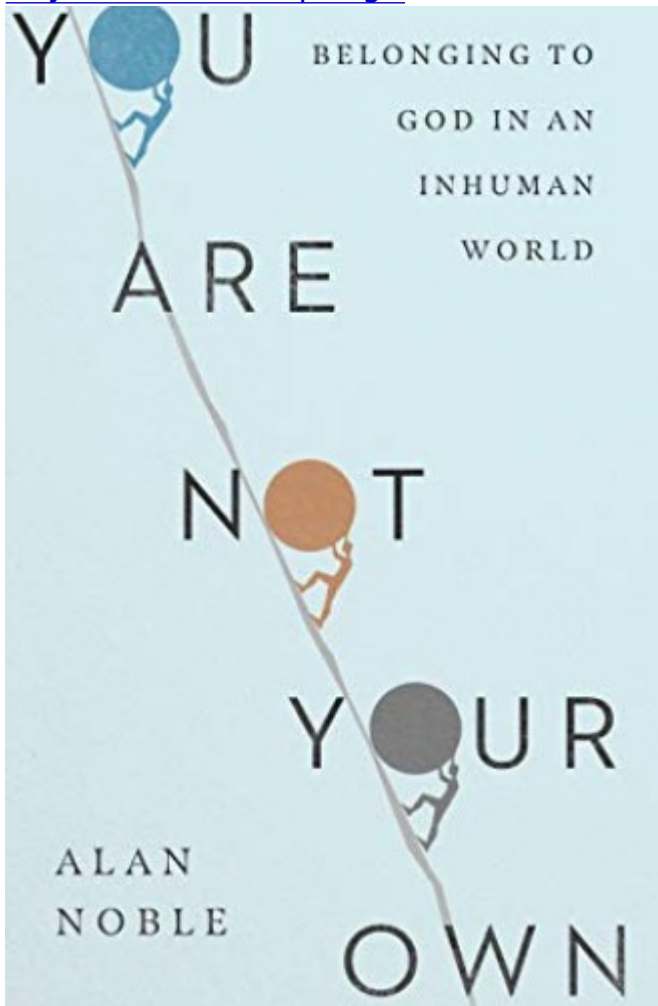
In Review



Fully Alive

The Apocalyptic Humanism of Karl Barth

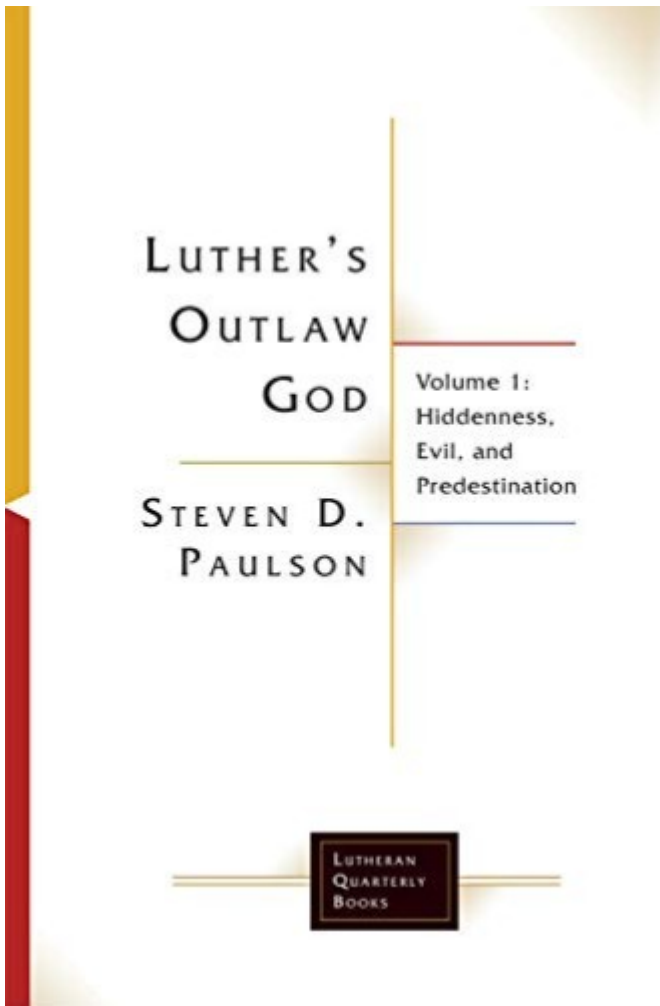
by Stanley Hauerwas
University of Virginia Press
[Buy from Bookshop.org](http://www.bookshop.org) >



You Are Not Your Own

Belonging to God in an Inhuman World

by Alan Noble
InterVarsity Press
[Buy from Bookshop.org](http://www.bookshop.org) >



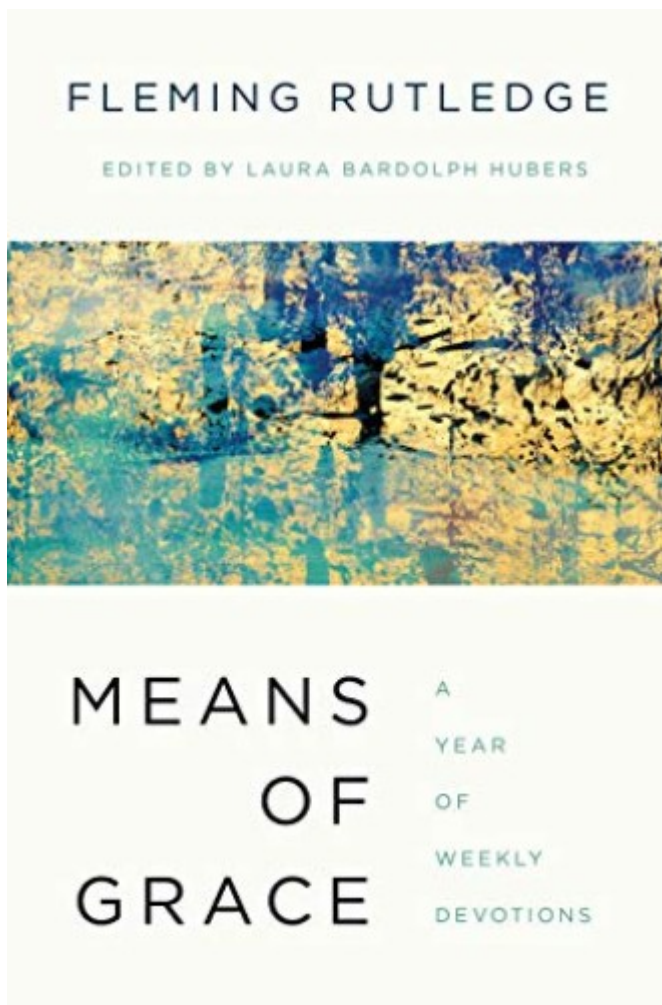
Luther's Outlaw God

Volume 3: Sacraments and God's Attack on the Promise

by Steven D. Paulson

Fortress Press

[Buy from Bookshop.org](http://Bookshop.org) >

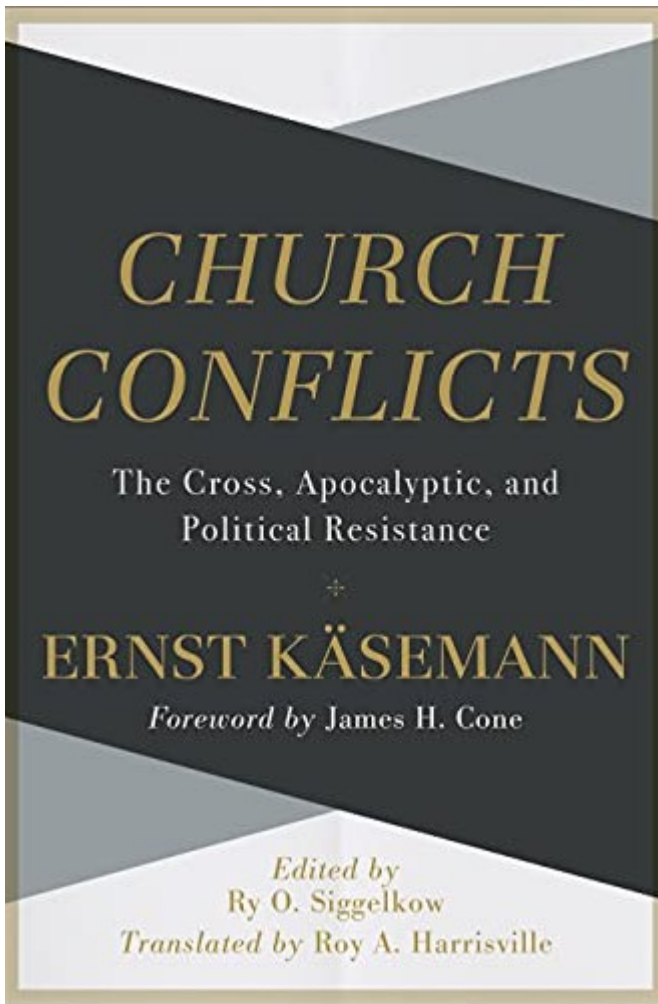


Means of Grace

A Year of Weekly Devotions

by Fleming Rutledge, edited by Laura Bardolph Hubers
Eerdmans

[Buy from Bookshop.org](https://bookshop.org) >



Church Conflicts

The Cross, Apocalyptic, and Political Resistance

translated by Ernst Käsemann

Baker Academic

[Buy from Bookshop.org](https://www.bookshop.org) >

When I was in high school, I worked as a volunteer for a Republican who was running for the Virginia General Assembly. Mrs. Smith was the district operative who told me where to post signs, stuff mailboxes, knock on doors, and—on election eve—take down the other candidate’s signs. For each campaign endeavor, she drove a van load of volunteers all over the south side of Richmond. During every outing, with some AM squawker on the radio, she’d turn away from the steering wheel to proselytize us in her latest conspiracy theory.

“President Clinton is responsible for the murder of several witnesses in the Whitewater scandal,” she told us one day as we drove into some planned community. “Honestly, what would you say if I told you Bill and Hillary were behind Vince Foster’s suicide being faked for political purposes? It’s a cover-up!”

Because I was a recent convert to Christianity and I believed Jesus expected us to tell the truth (even if the president did not), I told her the truth: “Honestly, I’d say you sound like an insane person.”

A few years later, I was surprised in church one day to find Mrs. Smith in the row ahead of me. Back in the day she’d been a militant pro-lifer but not a Christian. I asked her what she was doing at church. She frowned, and then she smiled. “Something took ahold of me back then,” she said, “What’s Jesus call him? The Prince of Lies? Anyways, thanks to these folks here, I’ve been set free.”

I thought about Mrs. Smith last January as I watched a lie-driven mob storm the US Capitol armed with zip ties and Christian paraphernalia. Numerous commentators have observed the extent to which the insurrection should be understood as a Christian riot. If it was, it represents not only the erasure of political norms and the breakdown of public trust but also a grave theological error. I chalk it up to providence that the past year has given us books that can equip preachers and believers to think theologically about the odd and trying times we are in.

It is never easy to know where we are in the world or what time it is in God’s history. Few anticipated, for instance, that a year that began with a fraught transfer of power in the United States would end on the dawn of a new cold war. That we see our time as in a mirror dimly makes the work of theology and proclamation a fragile, always occasional endeavor. In his latest essay collection, ***Fully Alive: The Apocalyptic Humanism of Karl Barth*** (University of Virginia Press), Stanley Hauerwas explores Barth’s short volume *Against the Stream*, written in the uncertain years when Stalinism waxed as Nazism waned.

Hauerwas finds that the way Barth does theology in light of politics is subtler than what’s suggested by his claim that we should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other hand:

Karl Barth’s famous claim may be good advice, but surely the newspaper is just as likely to mislead as it is to help us know where we are and/or

what time we are in. Barth's advocating reading the newspaper fails to answer the question of which newspaper we should be reading. I am not raising the problem of so-called fake news. Rather I am simply calling attention to the different worlds the different headlines of papers presume as well as create.

Because we live in a world of different worlds, worlds created by headlines and algorithms and amateurs posing as experts, Hauerwas shows the value in the way Barth refused to take a position against the Soviet Union based on abstract principles or general values. "For Barth," he writes, "the Church's obligations do not lie in the direction of fulfilling a law of nature but rather toward her living Lord. Therefore, the Church never acts on principle but judges spiritually and by individual cases." On such a case-by-case basis, Hauerwas proceeds in *Fully Alive* to apply Barth's apocalyptic humanism—that is, a humanism determined by the God revealed in Jesus—to individual subjects such as pastoral care, civil society, and race.

It may indeed be difficult to know where we are in God's history, as Hauerwas writes, but it certainly appears that we live at a time when race, and identity in general, is a fissure tearing the body politic asunder. In his helpful new book, ***You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World*** (InterVarsity Press), Alan Noble identifies and dissects the often unexamined premises in our discourse about identity. No doubt the anger that animated many who stormed the Capitol—the Q Shaman is but the most obvious example—is rooted in the reality that, try as we might, our identity is neither manufacturable nor achievable.

Noble puts the lie to the assumption that beneath the surface of the life we've been given we possess an authentic and unadulterated self, a latent true self that we must discover and build upon or to which we must be true. In a culture fraught with debates about individual liberty, Noble reminds us that we are not self-derived. We are another's product and property; we belong not to ourselves but to God.

Noble buttresses his argument with persuasive examinations of how contemporary culture understands identity in ways that finally lead to an inhuman expectation of the self. This construction of selfhood produces, on one end of the pole, burnout and anxiety, and on the other end, anger and injustice. *You Are Not Your Own* is a culture crash course, taking us to Augustine's epiphany that our hearts will always be restless until they find their rest in the God to whom we belong. Noble provides us a

fortuitous and real-world reclamation of the promise proclaimed to us by water and the Spirit.

How God applies this promise to us is the subject of the newest volume in Steven D. Paulson's ***Luther's Outlaw God*** series, which probes Martin Luther's emphasis on the hidden and the preached God. Cardinal Francis George of Chicago (definitely not a Lutheran) famously said that "our culture permits everything but forgives nothing." ***Volume 3: Sacraments and God's Attack on the Promise*** (Fortress Press) is invaluable for preachers in a culture that continually doubles down on the dialectic that George describes.

In this volume, Paulson examines the agency behind preaching and the sacraments. In word and water, wine and bread, the Absolute gives himself to us in his absolution, apart from any earning and deserving. The pardon of God not only removes any need for constructing a Christianity founded on certainty, Paulson shows, it silences the accusation of the law and thereby creates faith ex nihilo. Not only does Paulson provide an account of the preacher's office that preachers and church members will find reinvigorating, he excavates the language of Protestantism exactly at a time when we could use help silencing the din of accusation in our culture.

Of course, we're not the only accusers in our midst. The blame game is literally Satan's name. Although Reinhold Niebuhr said original sin was the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the faith, the past year has made a case that what Paul calls the principalities and powers also require little catechesis or conversion. In more than 20 years of ministry, I've often found that laypeople, like Mrs. Smith, exhibit greater nimbleness than seminary-educated, pensioned pastors in speaking about the one whom the New Testament names as the enemy.

For this reason, ***Means of Grace: A Year of Weekly Devotions*** (Eerdmans) is assuredly more than an entry in the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* collection. Like a sculptor chipping away, editor Laura Bardolph Hubers has distilled Fleming Rutledge's thick, challenging sermons into short weekly devotions. If the insurrection revealed a theological error widespread in the church and a captivity binding many believers, then church leaders must learn how to do substantive, faithful theology in brief and digestible bits. Likewise, we need to recover the apostles' language of the powers of evil. In *Means of Grace*, a deft editor has aided a treasured preacher in teaching other preachers how to speak of a world that is ruled by the powers yet

awaits the sure victory of the crucified and risen one.

As Mrs. Smith learned, it's no easy undertaking to distinguish the Holy Spirit from the spirits of this evil age. This year we received this first English translation of Ernst Käsemann's ***Church Conflicts: The Cross, Apocalyptic, and Political Resistance*** (Baker Academic). Much like Barth, Käsemann was forged in the crucible of conflict. His career reads like that of a man calling due the promise of God in a world enthralled to someone else. In this book of essays and sermons from the autumn of Käsemann's life, deftly translated by Roy A. Harrisville, we glimpse a theologian attempting, on a case-by-case basis, to obey his Lord in a time when it's difficult to discern the time.

The past year has demonstrated, I believe, how desperately the body of Christ needs the spiritual discipline of discernment. If scripture is right and the world is in bondage to a power that is not God, then we require a greater facility to discern, and so to resist, the forces of evil and oppression. No matter what time it is or how clearly we can see through the glass of God's history, *Church Conflicts* points us forward—not only to profess the Lordship of Jesus in our time and place, but to live faithfully in these discombobulating times while clinging to the promise of the gospel.

Read [*Jonathan Tran's ethics selections*](#) and [*NaShieka Knight's Old Testament selections*](#).