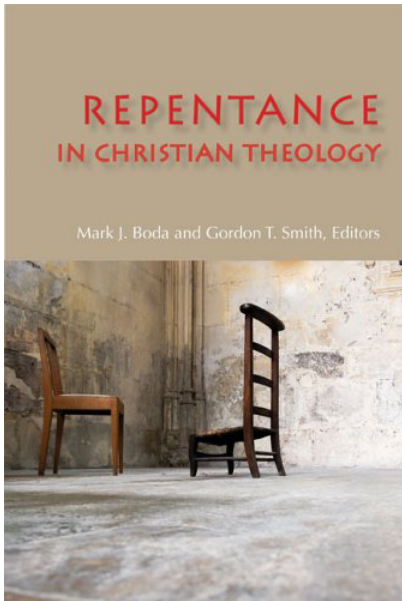


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**Boda, Mark J., and Gordon T. Smith, eds.**

***Repentance in Christian Theology***

Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2006. Pp. xviii + 425. Paper. \$39.95. ISBN 0814651755.

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This collection of essays on repentance contains chapters discussed at the 2003 and 2004 AAR/SBL meetings. The book is organized around four motifs, including canonical texts, historical perspectives, theological traditions, and reflections. The attempt at such an interdisciplinary conversation is refreshing, and it is clear that pains were taken to make the volume as inclusive as possible. Each chapter is followed by a list for further reading and a short hermeneutical reflection.

The intention of this collection is to operate within a theological conversation. Editor Mark J. Boda states that a broad interaction with the church, academy, and society is needed (xiv). One goal, according to Boda, is “to show the potential of a conversation across and among the theological disciplines to enhance a biblical scholars’ reading of the biblical text” (xvi). A second goal is “to see how such a conversation can also enhance a theologian’s reading of a particular tradition” (xvi). Finally, the goal of this book is “hermeneutical, reflecting on the conversation itself and discerning how reading together across disciplines and traditions enhances and enriches our reading of the Christian narrative” (xvi).

There are seven articles under the rubric of “canonical texts.” Boda’s chapter is entitled, “Renewal in Heart, Word, and Deed: Repentance in the Torah.” His thesis is that Torah is

an “important source for reflection on the theme of repentance and penitence in Christian theology” (3). He finds implications from the Torah for redemptive history, spiritual theology, the character of God, pneumatology, and community. Terence E. Fretheim’s thesis in “Repentance in the Former Prophets” is that the Former Prophets and Deuteronomy constitute a repentant act as well as an invitation to the readers to confession. The word of God’s judgment and promise cannot and should not be separated from a call to repentance. Carol J. Dempsey’s “‘Turn Back, O People’: Repentance in the Latter Prophets” argues that repentance is a central call and theme and, more specifically, that the prophets show God to be faithful despite the sins of Israel. Implications from this study focus on the need for repentance to be “authentic” (62). In “‘May Your Eyes Be Open and Your Ears Attentive’: A Study of Penance and Penitence in the Writings,” Richard J. Bautch examines the “Writings” and looks at four facets, including (1) repentance toward God, (2) repentance from a party, (3) divine forgiveness, and (4) theological reflection on the experience of repentance. From the conclusion that repentance in the Writings is a communal exercise, he asks if there are lessons for the church’s search for healing and forgiveness. Guy Dale Nave Jr.’s chapter is entitled “‘Repent, for the Kingdom of God Is at Hand’: Repentance in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts.” His thesis is that the concept of repentance in the New Testament has ties not only to the Old Testament but also to pre-Christian Greek usage and to Greek-speaking people. He makes five distinct implications for the church, the foremost being that repentance is not an option. The thesis of Edith Humphrey’s “‘And I Shall Heal Them’: Repentance, Turning, and Penitence in the Johannine Writings” is that the Fourth Gospel, the Johannine Epistles, and Revelation use the same light over against darkness theme to highlight the “dualism” between the repentant and the unrepentant (106). A significant implication for today’s culture is that John’s writings place repentance within a drama. Stanley Porter argues in “Penitence and Repentance in the Epistles” that, in considering the Pauline epistles, Hebrews, James, the Petrites, and Jude, there is more to the notion of repentance than first meets the eye (127–28). An implication of this survey is that repentance is variegated, yet a “*sine qua non*” at every stage of the Christian life (145).

There are two articles under the rubric of “historical perspectives.” Cornelia B. Horn’s chapter is entitled, “Penitence in Early Christianity in Its Historical and Theological Setting: Trajectories from Eastern and Western Sources.” This chapter surveys Christian texts from Greek, Latin, and Syriac sources. Horn finds that balancing penance as punishment and as an expression of a quest for change results in a positive spiritual trajectory. In “Private Confession in the German Reformation,” Ronald K. Rittgers argues that Lutheran private confession is an understudied practice of the Reformation era. The single most important implication is that private confession has a Protestant heritage from which to draw.

There are seven articles under the rubric of “theological traditions.” John Chryssavgis’s thesis in “Life in Abundance’: Eastern Orthodox Perspective on Repentance and Confession” is that there is an “equation between repentance and resurrecting, that repentance is resurrection unleashed” (211). Focusing his implications on Orthodox Christians, he finds that repentance should be a time of joyous “celebration” (227). Ralph Del Colle’s “Life as a Holy Penitent: The Catholic Call to Conversion” seeks to “illuminate the Catholic understanding of penance” (232). Implications focus on the Christian as an “ecclesial person” and the “sociality of the human being” (247). Andrew Purves’s chapter is entitled, “A Confessing Faith: Assent and Penitence in the Reformation Traditions of Luther, Calvin, and Bucer.” His objective is to ground repentance in baptism (with Luther), to reflect on repentance in the Christian life (with Calvin), and to consider consequences for pastoral ministry (with Bucer). Implications focus on God’s grace and why repentance is not the condition for grace. The thesis of Gordon T. Smith’s “The Penitential: An Evangelical Perspective” is that Evangelical and Protestant mainline denominations have neglected or intentionally set aside confession. Implications focus on Protestant churches and point to a need to reappropriate ideas about repentance from their own heritage. Cheryl Bridges Johns’s “Yielding to the Spirit: A Pentecostal Understanding of Penitence” contends that a Pentecostal vision of penitence is at the heart of the Christian journey and is expressed in a worshipful, Spirit-filled life. An important implication of her essay for Pentecostalism is the conclusion that the distinctive Pentecostal vision of penitence is in danger if it gives up rites such as footwashing and testimony (303–4) for the sake of conformity. Michael Battle’s thesis in “Penitence as Practiced in African/African American Christian Spirituality” is that an overview of African/African American expressions of penitence reveals a theological worldview of “God’s nonviolence and forgiveness” (329). He finds that the suffering, authenticity, and reconciliation experienced by the “Black church” can teach others how to move from ambivalence to joyful Christian living (339).

There are two articles under the rubric of “Reflection.” Walter Brueggemann’s chapter is entitled “The Summons to New Life: A Reflection.” The thrust of his chapter is that the consumer culture in the United States is in need of hearing the message of penitence, even if it is unwelcome. Ultimately, he finds that penitence must rest upon divine grace because we cannot make a “new life for ourselves” (369). In “Implications of This Book’s Insights for Liturgical Practices,” Marva J. Dawn surveys all the essays and focuses on practical items for liturgy and ecclesiology. She covers items such as private confession as well as dangers to avoid when engaging repentance in the church.

The volume concludes with an essay by Gordon T. Smith entitled, “The Jolly Penitent: Religious Leadership and the Practice of Confession,” in which he expounds on the label “jolly penitent” that was given to Blaise Pascal. Smith uses this label as an illustration of

his proposition that the Christian life consists of a necessary relationship between joy and repentance.

In the spirit of this volume, which ends each chapter with a reflection, I thought it would be appropriate to end this book review with my own reflection. First, one gets the distinct impression from this volume that the editors have achieved their goal of creating a theological conversation. There is a need for Christians to engage their own history and current practice of repentance, and this volume provides a framework of biblical, theological, and historical resources to begin such a journey. Nevertheless, the speech-acts of the Christian community must not be reduced to mere “conversation.” As Smith points out, the Christian community must “preach” a call to repentance (389). What begins as conversation must move forward to preaching. Negatively, this volume would have benefited from an essay focusing on differences and similarities between repentance and penitence, which are not always distinguishable.