

BOOK REVIEW

Root, Andrew 2025. **Evangelism in an Age of Despair: Hope beyond the Failed Promise of Happiness**

Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic
ISBN: 9781540968715

Reviewed by Felix Eiffler

In his new book on evangelism, Lutheran theologian Andrew Root presents an original and inspiring concept. Under the headline “Read before Using (Don’t Skip!)” he lays out his basic idea of his book: “Evangelism and discipleship are fused. Evangelism is the invitation to receive consolation, to receive ministry. Evangelism is the reception of care that places a person on a path of encounter with the divine. Evangelism is the invitation to lean into one’s sorrows to find the sacramental presence of the living God changing one’s deaths into life” (2). The first chapter sketches the idea of the book and its basic assumptions and rationales. This is, that the church is called to “participate in the life of God through the work of the Spirit” (21). Christians are followers of Christ, because “the Spirit leads us to hear the voice of the living Christ calling us to follow. This following takes us into sacramental participation as the concrete invitation to join another’s sorrow” (21–2).

Root criticizes an approach to evangelism that views evangelism as a task to keep the church alive (Chapter 2). His criticism is mainly a theological one: A church that avoids dying underestimates the godly dynamic of bringing new life through and out of death: “Therein lies the church’s conformity to the body of Jesus Christ. Therein lies the sacramental logic of the infinite entering into the finite, finding union in opposites. When Christianity faces death, it lives” (49). Consequently, Root states, “Evangelism is central to Christianity, but only if it wears these marks of a sacramental dying for the sake of others” (50).

This idea of evangelism is rooted into the Lutheran theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) and Root links it with the human condition of having to pilgrim through life from goodbye to goodbye until the ultimate farewell – one’s own death: “We are the creatures who are dying and tempted to deny all our sorrow. But it’s inside this sorrow, and by wrestling with this temptation, that we find ourselves in the real

presence of Jesus Christ" (250). Thus, evangelism is potentially relevant to every human being, because everybody sooner or later faces losses and goodbyes. This not only means to lose some loved one, but also to pass a dream, a goal or a plan. The experience of farewell is even true for the good things, because e.g. to marry means to say goodbye to a lifestyle of independence. This basic human condition offers the chance to encounter God, who reveals himself in the very depths of sorrow, grief and losses. So, evangelism is primary consolation – a comfort that is experienced when people meet God and are held, solaced, healed and saved by him.

To outline this Lutheran-shaped understanding of evangelism, Root dives deep into the history of philosophy and theology with an emphasis on the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age. He enriches the historical quest with ideas and thoughts from people like Macrina and her brother Gregory of Nyssa, Jean Gerson, Johann von Staupitz and Martin Luther as well as René Descartes and Blaise Pascal (Chapters 6 to 9). This approach also aims to understand our present times, which Root describes as sad times: "Ultimately, and ironically, we are in sad times in the early twenty-first century because we're a society obsessed with happiness. We are sad because we've made happiness our highest aim and goal" (27). Root connects the current "sad times" with the modern idea of the free self (Chapters 3 to 5), which he traces back to "Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), who, through his extremely popular essays, invented the self as a free person who seeks happiness" (28). Root concludes: "A world like ours – filled with sad happiness-seekers in misery who are stuck in their self-imposed châteaux of fragile authenticity – needs evangelism and ministry not as polemics but as consolation, not as arguments but as visions of how sorrow itself is shared by God and brings peace and mercy. What is needed is a theology of consolation as the pastoral shape of evangelism" (273).

Every chapter opens and ends with a continuous story of different people, whose lives are interwoven and who minister each other as everyday evangelists in accompaniment, support and consolation. By this, Root illustrates his theological thoughts and rationales. This attempt is quite convincing, because it serves his argumentation and helps to make his case.

Root's book on evangelism is a refreshing approach to this very topic and offers a rich philosophical as well as theological encounter with some surprising connections and ideas. His interaction with the named thinkers of different centuries is thorough and profound, but sometimes maybe a bit too detailed to keep track of his main theme. Although, his description of our times as sad times is persuasive, it is also a bit one-sided and focuses mostly on the downsides of individualism, which are evident. This, however, hides the positive aspects of individual access to and expressions of faith in Jesus Christ, which is also an achievement of the Lutheran reformation. Furthermore, one could criticize that Root's description of evangelism is focused primarily on the edges of life, the losses, sorrows and deficits. This leaves

the reader with some questions: What does the gospel have to tell those, who are well off (even though this might only be a temporary state)? Is the gospel only relevant for the sad and grieving ones? Is loss in Root's theology maybe somehow a precondition to encounter God?

Nevertheless, however, the kind of evangelism Root describes is stimulating, because he links the Gospel message of God incarnate with a basic human experience: to lose, to say goodbye, to pass and to be sad. The consolation that is offered by evangelism is a kind of Christian empowerment (see Domsgen 2025: 12–20), because it equips a person to lean into one's own sorrow and sadness instead fleeing from it. By this, to be evangelized means to encounter God, means to be consoled, means to be able to be confronted with the dark sides of life, means to be resilient and well suited for the small, medium and big farewells of life. And this leads finally to divine hope and deep happiness. This recontextualization of the theology of the cross in terms of evangelism under current (mostly Western) societal and cultural circumstances is inspiring and seems to be a fruitful approach to the topic of evangelism.

Root's approach to evangelism offers an enhancing perspective to the approach of "*Frohbotschaften*" (messaging the good news), which was lately introduced into the debate by David Reißmann in a German academic handbook on evangelism (see Herbst et al. 2025: 431–83; van Driel 2025: 77–83). *Frohbotschaften* is linked to Isaiah 61/Luke 4 and describes the role of a messenger of the gospel, "to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Lk. 4.18–19). Therefore, it is not that people are to be evangelized, but that the Good News is to be messaged – out of the specific joy of the church and ultimately for that joy – in words and deeds of proclamation, liberation, recovery and worship. Root adds to this approach the invitation into one's own and other's sadness in order to encounter God and thus find delight.

About the Reviewer

Felix Eiffler, Head of Research Unit Missional Church Development at the Center for Empowerment Studies, Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg. Contact: felix.eiffler@theologie.uni-halle.de

References

- Domsgen, Michael. 2025. "Christian Empowerment and Secularity: Introduction to a Research Idea", in *Ecclesial Futures* 6 (1): 12–20. DOI: 10.54195/ef22184.
- Herbst, et al. 2025: *Evangelisation. Theologische Grundlagen, Zugänge, und Perspektiven*. 2nd ed., Leipzig: 431–83.
- van Driel, Edwin. 2025. "Review of Evangelisation: Theologische Grundlagen, Zugänge, und Perspektiven, by Andreas Herbst et al.", in *Ecclesial Futures* 6 (1): 77–83. DOI: 10.54195/ef23521.