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Living in the Promises and Places of God

Can Anything Good Come Out of ____?

Faithful Witness in Suffering and Joy

Faithful Witness in Work and Rest

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EDITORIALS

As has become our custom, this spring issue of *Concordia Journal* publishes presentations from the preceding fall's Theological Symposium. This is how the 2014 Symposium brochure characterized the theme "Faithful Witness to God's Story in the World Around Us: Bringing a Unique Perspective to Common Human Experiences":

When we view our Christian witness within the full shape of the biblical narrative, how does that shape our view of the world? One way is that we begin to see all human beings—Christian and non-Christian—and all of creation, as characters in the story of God. In this story, faithful Christian witness shares struggles and joys with all people, yet also points to hope for the fullness of life in Christ's new creation.

This theme was an extension of, almost a sequel to, themes that arose from the 2013 Theological Symposium, "From the Creation to the New Creation: Seeing All Things in Light of the Entire Story." If the 2013 Symposium explored the "entire story" of faith, the 2014 Symposium looked at how we bear witness to that story "in the world around us." The key is to see how we give witness *with* others rather than simply give witness *to* them. This can become a first step in articulating how our shared experience fits within the singular story of God's good news in Christ.

After college (before seminary), I worked for Leonard Fiedler, longtime educator and fundraising professional in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. He was fond of saying that our work was done best when we worked with people "from the same side of the table." I know now that his truism applies to a whole lot of situations. We often look at our interactions with others as if we're on opposite sides of the table, as if the table were a chessboard. Turns out, though, that the conversation is more interesting—and more productive—when we look at things "from the same side of the table," especially when we find hidden commonalities we never knew we had.

One of the ironies of pitting the "church" too strictly against the "world" is that it relieves the church of its own responsibility, its own complicity in what is happening in the world around it. In short, the church can rail against the world much more easily when it doesn't bother to look in the mirror. Moreover, it short-circuits the joy of witnessing God's left hand hidden but at work in our common humanity and in all of creation.

As Lutherans, we are fond of quoting our patron saint. One of my favorite commonplaces from Luther is this: "If you could understand a single grain of wheat, you would die of wonder." Perhaps only when Christians share in this common human experience of deep *wonder* in even the tiniest things of this world will we gain enough of a footing with the others in our midst to be able to tell the full story—with confidence and integrity—of the One who likewise said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies . . ." (Jn 12:24).

Travis J. Scholl
Managing Editor of Theological Publications

More Lively Participation

How do we motivate our parishioners to lively participation in the life of the congregation? How do we conduct our ministries so that members feel good about their church? I don't mean "feel good" in a way that subordinates divine truth to pandering to people's whims, but rather that our laypeople will go into their workweeks ready to speak about the hope that is in them, the hope nourished by their lives in our congregations. Central to this is their most basic need, although not everyone appreciates its fundamental importance, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (Jn 12:21). Without Christ-centered congregational life, it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6).

Listening to sermons on and off campus, I notice a tendency that may explain in part declining participation in our congregations. Our presentations of the gospel often relegate God's actions to the past. "God sent his Son to die for your sins. You are forgiven." The cross, perhaps also the empty tomb, is often the sole focus of the gospel presentation, boringly followed by some application. Past events. Past tenses. Often the only present tense is a here-and-now third use of the law. Browse through your sermon manuscripts to see what tenses you use for the gospel. Our devotion to the passion and resurrection is absolutely necessary, but when a listener hears past events and past tenses, even granting the impact of the past for our present (e.g. "you are baptized"), the listener understandably will not truly appreciate that the gospel is present reality. Similarly, an exclusive focus upon the gifts given in the divine service to the exclusion of the hearers' lives shortchanges the power of God in the gospel. Living in an age of compartmentalization, boxing the acts of God into the past or into Sunday's means of grace doesn't fully foster an awareness of the presence and work of God in our lives now, a holistic understanding of Jesus's claim on us. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Dt 6:5). The worshipper who hears only past events and past tenses in our preaching can conclude that going to church means going to a museum. *Interesting displays but tomorrow I have to go to work and face here-and-now problems.* Perhaps our past tenses have even contributed to the redefinition of church attendance. Regular church attendance used to mean every Sunday; now it means once or twice a month. What happened in the first century AD is the sine qua non of saving faith, but God put us in the twenty-first century to ponder his presence in our daily lives, and he calls us to preach and teach it for our hearers in the lives they live the whole week long.

The chief Shepherd has guidance for us under-shepherds. "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction" (Rom 15:4). The first epistle of Peter is especially able to guide us into crafting sermons that bring eternal truths into the hearer's present. Peter was concerned that the centrality of Christ and congregational life was eroding among believers in mid-first-century Asia Minor. Most mainline American pastors can appreciate that concern! Because Peter's hearers lived as a minority in a society that at best was indifferent to Christians and at worst hostile to them, Peter wrote with Silvanus to encourage them to

a common sense of their unique, divinely-conferred identity and purpose, a sustaining social cohesion, and fervent commitment to mission nurtured by a unifying faith and hope involving steadfast loyalty to God, Jesus Christ, and the brotherhood. It is precisely this constellation of factors that the letter was designed to promote.¹

The erosion of cohesion and commitment centered upon Christ and the congregation jeopardized the goal of Christian faith, “the salvation of your souls” (1 Pt 1:9). Today our desire to motivate parishioners to more lively participation in the congregation should continue to be about the ultimate salvation of their souls. Because the “social cohesion” of congregations around Jesus Christ had eternal consequences for church members, Peter presented God’s saving action not only as a past event but also as a claim upon their present with a dominant view toward their eternal future. We can do the same.

We have an example in 1 Peter 1:13–21. These verses are pivotal in the development of the epistle. Keep in mind that most people in the Roman Empire were illiterate; the minority Christians heard the word of God read and proclaimed. They were listeners, not readers, of the epistle. In the first two verses these listeners have been greeted; the salutation in verses 1 and 2 opens key themes of the epistle (alien status, foreknowledge, holiness, and the obedience of faith). Then the listeners hear the awe-inspiring actions of God in their lives, past, present, and future, culminating in verse 12: “The things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.” Their breath taken by hearing that sweeping opening affirmation of their special status (at least it should have left them breathless), Peter and Silvanus now focus their listeners more specifically upon three broad motivations for their lives of faith.

The first is in 1:13. “Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” The verse is focused on the future with implications for the present. The key verb is the imperative, *elpisate*, hope or set your hope, and the object of hope is “the revelation of Jesus Christ.” That refers to his second coming, not his incarnation, and it promises “grace.” Grace for Peter is not only the saving grace that is distinguished from salvation by works (Eph 2:8–9) but the help that “the God of all grace” gives us pilgrims on our heavenward way. “After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you” (1 Pt 5:10). Reflecting on our own preaching practice, how often do our listeners leave worship with thoughts on the last day or the day death ushers them into eternity? Certainly after a funeral or late in the church year when the end times appear in the lectionary, but if I’d go back and read my sermons, I expect that’s pretty much where I consigned seeing Jesus, to funerals or the end times. Then it easily becomes preaching law; *dies irae, dies illa, solvet saeculum in favilla* (the day of wrath, that day, will dissolve the world in ashes). Even more telling, how many of our parishioners yearn for the coming revelation of Jesus during

their daily lives? Peter reminded his hearers that the last day is gospel for them and the prospect of seeing Jesus should motivate them—and us in our time—to Christ-centered living in the present. That present living is described by participles, which should not be translated as imperatives. “Set your hope” is the imperative; the participles are consequences of that lively hope. “Preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace . . .” That you and I and our hearers are going to see Jesus is a blessed future reality that motivates us to lively hope and careful conduct here and now. We wouldn’t have that hope without the passion and resurrection of Christ, but in a text like this the dominant gospel proclamation is the grace we await on the last day. While we must be wary of eisegesis, that future orientation can, I believe, be brought into many more texts than merely funeral or end time pericopes.

In anticipation of that day, the second motivator to Christian living is the present impartial judgment of the holy God, 1:14–17.

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.

This is predominantly law but has “gospel handles” with both law and gospel focused on the present. *Father* suggests gospel; God is our loving Father and “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3). *Obedient children* is the result of gospel, “born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1:3). However, this “Father . . . judges impartially according to each one’s deeds.” *Judges* is a present active participle, *krinonta*; the all-seeing God judges us here and now. Were it a future participle, “the Father who will judge,” we could easily imagine deferring holiness to later in life, but the participle is present and we’re told to “be holy” here and now, not just do holy things. This present holiness is to live according to the will of God, not the emotions that drive the Gentiles (cf. 4:2). Future judgment is not out of consideration (1:13; 4:5 for example), but Peter focuses especially on the present. Holy being precedes holy doing, quoting Leviticus 19:2 and drawing on the Holiness Code. “You will recognize them by their fruits” (Mt 7:20). And this present judgment is *impartial*, something Peter had learned dramatically at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:34–35) and it is “according to each one’s deeds.” The demand of holiness is not satisfied by our people coming to worship, nor do we satisfy it by being pastors. In my itinerant preaching I have occasionally quizzed people: Does God judge according to our works? Well-conditioned Lutherans shake their heads “no,” but in fact this passage and many others say that we are judged by works. My second quiz question, “Will you be saved by works?” again elicits a no, but in fact we are saved by works, Jesus’s works, not ours.² My point is twofold. First, many of our people don’t understand what the shortcut word *faith* really signifies. Second, the present impartial judgment of God should drive us to fear God during our sojourn to heaven because our conduct and being is sinful, but we are awed because God is the Father who gives us our only hope of salvation, Jesus.

Lest we fret that a strong preaching emphasis upon the present and future will lead us to minimize the past, Peter's third motivator, 1:18–21, the longest of the three, grounds all his exhortation in the passion, resurrection, and ascension of our Savior.

Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Pages could be written about these verses but a few remarks will suffice. First, since we minister in an age that doesn't acknowledge or obey absolute truth, an age when most lives are desire-driven, "knowing" (*eidotes*) recalls us to the objective truth revealed in Scripture. This truth, revealed to the prophets of the Old Testament (1:10–12), requires the obedience of faith (cf. "obedience to Jesus Christ" and "having purified your souls by obedience to the truth," 1:2; 22). Just as Peter exhorted his hearers to live lives peculiar to their distinct difference from the surrounding culture, so cohesion and commitment to Christ and his congregation is advanced by drawing distinctions between the way Christ-followers live and the way post-church America lives.

Second, Peter directs his listeners to what Jesus *did*, but he puts it in an eternal perspective. Jesus "was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest" in his incarnation and was raised from the dead and given "glory," his ascension, and reign (cf. 3:22). We do well to preach that, dependent upon a Savior who is "the same yesterday and today and forever," we should live our short lives in the fear of God (Heb 13:8). Indeed, the next major section following 1:13–21 quotes Isaiah and trumpets again the preaching of the word: "All flesh is like grass . . . but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Pt 1:24–25).

Much more can be written on these precious verses, but I'll close with this. We preach out of ourselves. Sermon outlines and the words we script for delivery come out of who we are, the genetics and teachings and influences and experiences that have shaped us as the individual believers we are in Jesus Christ. We do not go at a text as unbiased observers, as if our studies of the word have lifted us out of our own day and age. Yes, the word gives us a different perspective upon the assumptions of current culture, but we remain part of the present. And we don't preach as an unfeeling proclaimer of the word because this word brings to us also personal salvation; "we also believe and so we also speak" (2 Cor 4:13). The fear and love of God seizes us, and when it does not, that's our sin of compartmentalizing God into the Sunday sanctuary and our service in ministry. We all have a desire to motivate our parishioners to lively participation in the life of the church, and we want to conduct our ministries so that members feel good in a proper way about their church. To do so is not only a matter of "rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tm 2:7) but also of our own integrity as saved sinners who live our lives and conduct our ministries in the fear and love of God. So the Spirit has

planted deep in our being the conviction that church is not a museum and we are not called to be curators of the past. The word that saves is a word to be “living and active” (Heb 4:12) in our proclamation to others: God active—past, present, and future—for the goal of our salvation.

William Barclay told about a man’s experience with a famous preacher.

He told me that he had been a regular army officer, and that on Sunday mornings when he found himself posted anywhere near, he used to slip away to hear this preacher. Once he took his little niece along with him—about ten years of age. When they came out of the church, his first question was: “Well, what did you think of that minister?” “Terrific,” came the surprising answer. “I had two sweeties with me in my pocket, and I clean forgot to eat them!”

That is just about the best compliment I have ever heard to a preacher.

Wherein does this power lie? Someone has said that every preacher must try to give his people . . . something to feel. No great preacher was ever afraid of emotion. He must give the impression that this thing matters intensely, both to him and to his hearers; that it is in literal fact a matter of life and death.

A sermon cannot really be a pleasant and informal chat; it cannot be an innocuous moral essay; still less can it be a formality which has to be gone through. And yet it does sometimes give that impression. Rhadakrishnan, the great Indian thinker, once said of preachers and theologians of the West known to him: “Your theologians seem to me like men talking in their sleep.” On the other hand, we must not forget the witness of one: “I preached what I did feel—what I smartingly did feel.”

The preacher must feel the wonder of the Christian message. Only then can he stab awake the dull and listless hearts of men and women for whom a church service has somehow become a bore rather than a thrill.³

When we approach the preaching task out of our ever-increasing devotional awareness of the all-encompassing acts of God for our personal salvation (“what I smartingly did feel”), we might very well see more social cohesion in our congregations as together we follow Jesus in faith and hope, eager to see him on that day, “being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (5:4).

Dale A. Meyer
President

Endnotes

¹ John H. Elliott, *1 Peter*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 104–105.

² Augsburg Confession V: The Gospel “teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ’s merit, when we so believe” (Kolb-Wengert). Cf. *LSB* 565, “Thy Works, Not Mine, O Christ.”

³ William Barclay, “In the Hand of God,” in *For All the Saints*, vol. II (Delhi, NY: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1995), 250.

ARTICLES

Living in the Promises and Places of God A Theology of the World

Charles P. Arand and Erik H. Herrmann

The 2013 symposium highlighted the importance of telling the fuller story of God that stretches from the original creation to the new creation. This has become an important task for the church when people are inundated by bits of information but don't know how to put all those pieces together into a coherent and comprehensive story. And in the church, a growing biblical illiteracy leaves many people without the ability to know how the lectionary readings fit within the overarching story . . . a story that does not begin with the fall nor end at Calvary.

After addressing the importance of story for faith and community, the symposium took up several underemphasized facets and placed them into the greater story. These facets included the role that creation plays for the entire story, the resurrection as the center of the story, and the new creation as the goal of the story.¹ This year, we continue to explore the fuller story of God, but with reference to how it impacts our witness in the world. Or to put it another way, how do we give faithful witness to the entire story of God within our world today? How do we tell that story, and how do we embody that story within our lives? Two helpful insights emerged from last year's symposium for thinking about our witness at this year's symposium.

First, everyone is already a part of that story because everyone is a creature of God. There is a common life that Christians and non-Christians share. We all experience the good blessings of God in which he gives life and sustains life. This world and those who live within it are the objects of God's work. Hence the first part of this year's title, "Faithful Witness to God's Story *in the World around Us*." Second, Christians are privy to the "fuller" story, which gives them a unique perspective on our human experiences. Christians see these experiences in light of the new creation ushered in by Christ's resurrection, which gives those experiences new depth and meaning. Hence the subtitle of this symposium, "Bringing a Unique Perspective to Common Human Experiences."

Reciprocity of Witness

A key insight from last year's symposium prompted us to explore the idea that there is reciprocity of witness between Christians and non-Christians. This arose from the recognition that the Christian way of viewing and organizing the world arises from

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the doctrine of creation, namely, the ontological distinction between the creator and the creature. On one side of the ledger is God the creator. On the other side of the ledger is everything else. That means we have more in common with each other (Christian or not) and with the non-human creation than we have in common with God. What is it that we have in common with each other? We all share a common creatureliness for we are all creatures of God. As such, we all share the blessings of creaturely life and are the objects of the Creator's care and concern.

How might this realization help our witness? First, it challenges the exclusive use of some of our frequently used distinctions in terms of how we view the world. One of our challenges is to balance the church's opposition to the world with the church's common life with the world. Is our engagement with the world only one of confrontation and conflict? Can we only say "no" to the world? And even if we can say "yes" to some things, must our "no" always be louder than our "yes"? Consider the following.

How do we view the world in which we live? That word "world" has almost automatic connotations of "bad" and "dangerous" among most Christians. This is all the more tempting in our post-Christian world when Christianity is losing its influence upon the larger culture, an influence that it has enjoyed for the last seventeen hundred years or so. It now finds itself in an increasingly hostile culture. There is biblical warrant for this—after all, we are called to be in the world but not "of the world" (Jn 17:14–15). And Luther often groups the world with the devil and our flesh (SC, II.11).² But is there a danger to viewing things in such exclusive categories? Does it create a false dichotomy in which we either embrace this world or embrace the next world? And when we do that, do we see culture as essentially negative? Again, the greater story of the creation to the new creation reminds us that this is God's world. And God is at work in this world. He remains present and active in this world.

How do we talk about non-Christians? Do we see them only in terms of "us and them"? "Outsiders and insiders"? "Saved and lost"? This is true and quite biblical (e.g., lost sheep) when viewed solely in terms of salvation. That is to say, there are those who believe in Jesus and are saved; there are those who do not believe in Jesus and thus are not saved. But the greater story offers a wide-angle field of vision and highlights another underlying reality. We are all creatures of God. This means that we have much in common with non-Christians. We share common places within creation where we experience God's lavish creaturely gifts. And we share common human experiences as we live out our lives in those places. And God works through both Christians and non-Christians for the sake of his creation. This suggests that as Christians we might be able to gain helpful insights into God's creation from non-Christians.

And how do we talk about our witness among non-Christians? Do we talk about the need to bring the story of God to them? Do we think of witness as speaking a word of the gospel only to those who know nothing of it? This is understandable given that the direction of salvation in Christ is one way. After all, the Son of God goes forth from the Father into the world. He alone descends into the depths of death and brings forth a new life in a new creation. There is no way to discover this other than through God sending people into the world with glad tidings of his promises.

And yet we go into a world that God himself has created. This means that we are giving witness to the story of which non-Christians are already a part—even though they are unaware of that story. So what does it mean that our witness of the gospel goes out into a world that God has made? It means that we go out into a world in which we receive not only God’s saving work but also his creating work. In that regard, we stand *alongside* everyone else as fellow creatures of God. And we live in the same world created by God. So what happens to our witness when we place ourselves on the same side of the ledger as non-Christians, co-recipients of God’s goodness and grace? And what happens to our witness when we relate to the world in terms of its promised future in which all people are seen as potential recipients of the Spirit’s life-giving breath? Looking at our neighbor and the goodness of creation through the lens of the third article of the Creed and the eschatological work of the Spirit, we may in fact be looking at our future brother or sister in Christ!

God’s Goodness in Creation

Consider again the title of this article, “Living in the Promises and Places of God.” We know quite well that it is God’s word, God’s *promises*, that create life and places for life. And these “places” are not just the location, the zip code, the terra firma upon which we live, but “places” also include our experiences within God’s creation. Now as Christians, the heart and center of our faith and life are God’s promises for salvation. And these promises create a unique and peculiar place: a community that lives by and through his word—a spoken word, a sacramental word, a written word. In *this* place, his promises draw in the stuff of the earth and his creation—water, bread, wine, our lips, and our language—and drag them into the beginnings of his *new* creation. What we experience through these promises in this place are the means of his *grace*—grace which gives us confident and certain hope and a vision of a life that finds its future in Christ, riding on his coattails through death and into resurrection. The promises of this “grace place” not only point us to a future world, they also change our view of the present world around us. The beauty and goodness that we see has an ultimate tomorrow, the pain and suffering that we see does not. And so this sacred space, as it pulls in the stuff of this world to promise its renewal, also urges us back out into our present world, into the goodness that remains in creation, knowing from whence it came and to where it will ultimately go.

Martin Franzmann distinguished the words *grace* and *goodness* as a way to express how the first-article promises of God can be commonly experienced by both Christians and non-Christians.³ (This is perhaps better than the Reformed tradition which uses “special grace” and “common grace”—categories that are too readily married to other distinctive doctrines like limited atonement and double predestination.) However, it’s the continuity between the two—between God’s “grace” of salvation and God’s “goodness” in creation—that we wish to stress here. Both are unmerited and both spring from the loving-kindness of God. Thus you may recall Luther’s words on the first article in the catechism, “all this out of divine fatherly goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me.” So both the creaturely gifts and redemptive gifts of God

are given freely out of his undeserved generosity. Both kinds of gifts have the power to draw us to God, to consider well his benefits, and to give him thanks.

Now to be clear, we know that only in the means of grace where God has promised to be present in Christ *pro nobis* (for us) do we have the certain clarity of who God is and the nature and scope of his love for us. Simply experiencing God's goodness in creation is not enough and cannot by itself lead us into true knowledge and faith in God. In fact, in our experience of God's goodness in creation (as seen above) we are likely to miss the Creator and trust and worship the creature. The irony is (as in Romans 1) that precisely because there is so much genuine goodness in God's world, there are more opportunities for people to make false religions on the basis of it. This is one of Luther's important insights in the Heidelberg Disputation as he sets forth a theology of the cross over against a theology of glory. Though one must affirm the inherent goodness of creation, Luther notes that without the perspective brought on by the cross, we will use the best things in the worst way, that is, we will ascribe divinity to them.⁴

In the same way, C. S. Lewis notes that there seems to be a "general rule in the moral universe which may be formulated 'the higher, the more in danger.' . . . It is great men, potential saints, not little men, who become merciless fanatics. . . . Of all bad men religious bad men are the worst. Of all created beings wickedest is one who originally stood in the immediate presence of God."⁵ Further, in *The Great Divorce* he writes, "It's not out of bad mice or bad fleas you make demons, but out of bad archangels. . . . Lust is baser than . . . mother-love or patriotism or art: but lust is less likely to be made into a religion. . . . Brass is mistaken for gold more easily than clay is."⁶

Still, in spite of such proclivities, we ought to not completely abandon the positive power that the goodness of creation promises for witness. As Paul preached to the Iconians in Acts 14, "[God] did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." And as Luther noted in his Genesis lectures "if you ponder in your heart the whole course of nature and of this whole life . . . you will find more good than bad things and you will also see that a very small part is subjected to the power of the devil" (*LW* 6:90). Likewise in his lectures on Jonah, the experience of creation gives a certain positive illumination to all people so that God may be regarded as "kind, gracious, merciful, and benevolent. And that is a bright light indeed" (*LW* 19:54).

The Goodness of Being a Creature

In the first article of the Large Catechism, Luther makes a rather surprising confession. He opens by quoting the first article of the Apostles Creed and then asks, "What does it mean to believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth"? He answers that question not by describing or detailing all of God's works in the entire universe. Instead, he answers it by saying that it means, "I am God's creature!"⁷

But what does it mean to be God's creature? It means that I receive from God life and all that sustains my life in this world. As a creature, I am by definition contingent and dependent. To borrow from the Apostle Paul, "What do I have that I have not received?" (1 Cor 4:7). As one who does not have life of oneself, as one who is not

self-sustaining or autonomous, I have to look somewhere for the support and sustenance of my life. Luther concludes the first article in the Small Catechism, “for which it is my duty, to thank and praise, serve and obey.” He says the same thing in virtually the same words in the Large Catechism, but then adds, “Serve and obey according to the Ten Commandments.”

And that brings us to the first commandment. Here we learn that for Luther the first commandment is *not* a question of faith versus non-faith. For the truth is that no one can live without faith! So given that everyone has to put their faith and hope in something or someone, the question becomes one of *true* faith versus *false* faith. And what determines whether faith is true or false is whether the object of faith is the true God or not (LC I.3).

So the question now becomes, “Where shall we turn? Where shall we look for that which ‘supports this body and life?’” As creatures, we cannot help but look somewhere. To whom should we direct our thanks and praise when we experience wonder and gratitude?

So what implications does this carry for our witness to God’s story in the world? Well, and by way of contrast, consider one of the most popular models of door-to-door evangelism several decades ago. A program known as *Evangelism Explosion* provided a way of training people for witness by giving them initial questions with which to open a conversation followed by an outline to guide the conversation.⁸ In its Lutheran form, *Evangelism Explosion* became *Dialog Evangelism*.⁹

Key to those programs was initiating conversation through questions such as: “If you were to die tonight, do you know for certain that you would go to heaven?” “If God were to ask you why he should let you into his heaven, what would you say?” These questions, designed to get at the certainty of salvation and to diagnose one’s reliance on works, opened the door for a gospel presentation.

But what are the underlying assumptions of those questions? Take the first question: “If you were to die tonight, do you know for certain that you would go to heaven?” It assumes that people believe that there is such a thing as heaven. And it assumes that people want to go to heaven. Such assumptions make sense in a culture that is undergirded and shaped by the Christian story. And it makes sense when encountering people who have some residual memory of the Christian story from childhood. But are those assumptions fading in our culture today? We may not be able to work with such assumptions in the future.

Now, let’s consider how Luther’s treatment of the first commandment might offer an alternative. Luther begins with the anthropological assumption that all people are creatures. As such, they cannot live without centering their lives on someone or something. They must look for life somewhere. This anthropological assumption suggests that first and foremost we listen to people before we speak. In particular, we listen to how they express the creaturely need for a center.

Now, we tend to focus on the negative side of Luther’s anthropological insight, namely, they have latched onto one idol after another in their search for an anchor that holds. You might say they look for God “in all the wrong places”!¹⁰ They only turn to

false Gods, “indeed they can do no other” (FC II), and so they need to repent and turn to the true God. And that is most certainly true! But that answer only takes as its starting point the sinfulness of the person.

But is there a positive side to Luther’s anthropological insight, one that affirms the creaturely need for God? Might it be said that while having idols is an affront to God it is at the same time a witness to our creaturely need and longing for God? Doesn’t the constant search for new idols capture something of Augustine’s famous statement: “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee, O Lord”? Let’s explore this positive side a bit more in terms of creatures and creaturely gifts.

As Lutherans, we are accustomed to speaking about the anthropology of Christians before God (*coram deo*) in terms of being simultaneously sinners and saints (*simul justus et peccator*). In the eyes of the law we are sinners; in the eyes of the gospel, we are justified before God. But what about all humans including those who do not confess Jesus as Lord? I would propose that we think of *all* people as simultaneously creatures and fallen creatures (*simul creatus et peccator*).¹¹ This distinction is the theological contribution and importance of Article I of the Formula of Concord.

This distinction reminds us that in dealing with other people, we are dealing with fellow creatures of God who are made in the image of God. No matter how sinful, they remain the good creation of God. Years ago, Jaroslav Pelikan wrote an article on the anthropology of the Lutheran Confessions in which he made the important observation that creatureliness is the foundation of the anthropology of the entire Book of Concord.¹² And as human creatures of God, they exhibit the creaturely need and desire and longing for God. To be sure, they look for God “in all the wrong places” and thus stand under his judgment, but we can affirm their creaturely need for an anchor to their lives.

So, our starting point is to listen to find points of connection with the entire story of God. We are listening for how they experience the creatureliness that they share with us. We are listening both to affirm the good and to redirect the wrong.

Implications for Witness

Now let’s bring together these two strands—God’s creation and our creatureliness—and draw on some of the possible implications for shaping our understanding of witness in and with the world.

Our colleague, David Schmitt, shared a story with us a couple of months ago about one of his friends. His friend was not Christian and neither was his wife. Though David had had many conversations with him about faith, God, and the gospel over the years, he stayed away from the church. Then one day, after a racquetball game, he asked Dave if he would come with him to church on Sunday—his wife and his newborn daughter were getting baptized. “How did this happen?” asked an incredulous David (wondering how the Lord had worked through their discussions to bring this about). His friend responded, “Remember the big-screen TV you helped me unload?” Dave remembered. “Well,” he said, “one afternoon we were watching the game on TV and my wife says to me, ‘I’d like to go to church.’ I’m like, ‘What!’ and she says,

‘No, really, think about it. We’ve got it so good right now. This house, our family, our health, your work with troubled kids. Everything is just so very . . . good. I just feel like I need to give thanks to someone. I’d like to go to church.’” And that was the beginning of her journey with her daughter to baptism.

It’s interesting; she caught something—caught a glimpse of something more in her experience of creation’s goodness. Her heart was drawn to gratitude toward an unknown. Obviously, what she expressed is only part of the story; the tragedy in creation that cuts through every human heart and is in need of redemption is also part of the story. But this is a beginning, a beginning found not in law and guilt and theological knowledge of sin but in the common place, the shared space of God’s goodness to his creatures. It is a beginning found in flourishing and in gratitude, gratitude which has more in common with faith than unbelief. As G. K. Chesterton once put it, “The worst moment for the atheist is when he is really thankful and has nobody to thank.”¹³

In Elizabeth Gilbert’s novel, *The Signature of All Things*, the main character is Alma Whittaker, a woman born in 1800 who fell in love with botany.¹⁴ While still unmarried, living on her father’s many-acre estate outside Philadelphia, the familiarity of the countryside began to dull her curiosity. That is until one day she noticed some mosses growing on a boulder. Gilbert writes,

Alma put the magnifying lens to her eye and looked again. Now the miniature forest below her gaze sprang into majestic detail. She felt her breath catch. This was a stupefying kingdom. This was the Amazon jungle as seen from the back of harpy eagle. She rode her eye above the surprising landscape, following its paths in every direction. Here were rich, abundant valleys filled with tiny trees of braided mermaid hair and miniscule, tangled vines. Here were barely visible tributaries running through that jungle, and here was a miniature ocean in a depression in the center of the boulder, where all the water pooled.¹⁵

Later in the book, Alma is asked about religion and whether she believes in an afterworld. She replies, “I have never felt the need to invent a world beyond this world, for this world has always seemed large and beautiful enough for me. I have wondered why it is not large and beautiful enough for others—why they must dream up new and marvelous spheres or long to live elsewhere, beyond this dominion . . . but that is not my business. We are all different, I suppose.”¹⁶

Two things stand out in this excerpt. First, Alma’s demurring about religion is really the rejection of the escapist narrative, the truncated version of the Christian story. This perception of Christianity is at best aloof from creation, at worst hostile to it. Alma cannot reconcile this view with the world that she knows and experiences, a world beautiful and vast that invites endless curiosity and delight. How often have we encountered people who are unimpressed with Christianity largely because all they have encountered is a foreshortened Christian story that seems disinterested in the world? What might have been Alma’s response if she were asked instead about a hope in which all of the goodness and wonder of the world that she has experienced has an eternal future?

The second thing to be observed is that “atheists feel awe, too.”¹⁷ God’s world has the capacity to draw one into a sense of wonder and delight, a longing for and a loving of the life that he created, even when acknowledgment of God as its author is wanting. The experience is filled with possibility, both good and bad, as a stepping stone to faith or as the beginning of idolatry. So often it is the latter. But the Spirit—who broods over the earth as the Lord and giver of life—may take the experience captive for faith and Christ.

Directions for Mutual Witness

These insights open the possibility of *reciprocity*—a mutual witness in which the lives of both Christians and non-Christians can bear witness to part of the story of God.

First, it means that Christian witness entails *listening*. Listening certainly means being attentive to that which is missing in the lives of people who do not yet know Christ. To be sure, it means being wary of that which threatens and undermines the gospel—those things in human experience that can so easily become a false religion. In this kind of listening, we are relatively well-versed. We know well the negative effects of the culture upon Christian witness. We are familiar with the things that erode our moral life, that erode the presuppositions of our faith. But what about listening for that which is consonant with the faith . . . those things that contribute to joy, hope, and love? Can *we* be witnessed *to*? Can non-Christians enrich our own understanding of what God is doing in this world?

We would suggest, yes. And not just because it is a strategically good idea to have a little give-and-take when we talk to non-Christians. But yes, because it is a necessary consequence of confessing the fuller biblical story. Part of confessing that story is to confess that it is far bigger than any of us can grasp. It is cosmic in scope; the goal of salvation history is that God would be all in all. This means that our experience of all of the intricate details of what God has done and will do is still unfolding—we are still growing into Christ, we are still being conformed to his image—and the whole world waits with eager anticipation for the full redemption of God’s children.

Luther’s theological insights in the catechism highlight a reciprocal, antiphonal theology of the Creed (moving from the first article to the third article and back again). This also has implications for reciprocity in witness. To be sure, the direction of salvation in the world is one way—God coming to us, descending into our world in his Son to bring it down into the depths of death and bring it out again into the life of a new world and new creation. But witness in the world does not move only in a single direction. If Christians stand at the receiving end of God’s grand creating and saving work and word, then there is a sense that we stand alongside everyone. When we fully appreciate that no aspect of creation, no creature of God is untouched by his word and work, our witness gains a certain posture in which the universal scope of God’s grace becomes the object of our discourse. In this discourse *mutual* witness is possible as the lives of both Christians and non-Christians function as a testimony to part of the story of God.

What does this reciprocal witness look like? Obviously we can learn from others outside the church about the creation, in the realm of the first article: E. O. Wilson’s

directing us into the remarkable world of the ant, or Neil deGrasse Tyson conducting us into the wonders of the cosmos. But just as our experience of the creation—with the eyes of faith—can point us to the new creation, can this also be true of what we might gain from those outside the church? Do their acts of love and beauty, their patient endurance of suffering, their delight in the world illumine our understanding of the gospel and the goal of creation? Again we would say, yes. When the creation gives us a glimpse of the wonder of what God will do, we do not experience this in isolation but in community with our fellow human beings. And non-Christians contribute to this experience so that—perhaps even without faith and understanding themselves—they deepen ours. Whether in the restlessness of the heart of which St. Augustine spoke, or, at the other end of the spectrum, in the joy and beauty of Beethoven's Ninth, Christ becomes the meaning and *telos* of it all.

Yet in the end, the Christian insight into the world—its beginning, its ending, and its center—is unique and indispensable. In the gospel of Christ we have truly been given a treasure that is found nowhere else in creation. The story of God's creation and re-creation of the world encompasses more than the Christian experience, but it is the Christian experience that finally holds the story together and gives it full meaning. This is the privilege and challenge of faithful Christian witness, to play our part and give voice to the chapter that serves as the key to the entire story.

C. S. Lewis once described the Christian gospel precisely as such a missing chapter:

Supposing you had before you a manuscript of some great work, either a symphony or a novel. There then comes to you a person, saying, "Here is a new bit of the manuscript that I found; it is the central passage of that symphony, or the central chapter of that novel. The text is incomplete without it. I have got the missing passage which is really the center of the whole work." The only thing you could do would be to put this new piece of the manuscript in that central position, and then see how it reacted on the whole of the rest of the work. If it constantly brought out new meanings from the whole of the rest of the work, if it made you notice things in the rest of the work which you had not noticed before, then I think you would decide that it was authentic. On the other hand, if it failed to do that, then, however attractive it was in itself, you would reject it.

Now, what is the missing chapter in this case, the chapter that Christians are offering? It is the story of the Incarnation—the story of a descent and resurrection. . . . [This] is the missing chapter in this novel, the chapter on which the whole plot turns; . . . that God really has dived down into the bottom of creation, and has come up bringing the whole redeemed nature on His shoulders. The miracles that have already happened are, of course, as Scripture so often says, the first fruits of that cosmic summer which is presently coming on. Christ has risen, and so we shall rise.¹⁸

Conclusion

Our Christian witness in the twenty-first century will take place in a culture that knows less and less of the Christian story. And what fragments people do know will probably make little sense since they will not know how they fit within the larger story. So it becomes imperative that we relearn how to tell the story, the *full* story that stretches from creation to the new creation. But as we tell that story, we will discover new opportunities for witness. This includes not only the way in which we diagnose the brokenness of this world and human lives, but also the way in which we live out the underlying truth that this world remains God's world. In it he is present and active so that, as we live alongside our fellow human creatures, we are "richly and daily supplied" with a profusion of possibility for faithful witness to God's goodness and grace.

Endnotes

- ¹ See *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 2 (Spring 2014).
- ² All references to the Lutheran Confessions are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).
- ³ Thanks to Jim Voelz who recounted for us this distinction having heard it at a Franzmann lecture.
- ⁴ See Heidelberg Disputation, theses 22–24: "That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened. The 'law brings the wrath' of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ. *Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner.*" See also the explanation to thesis 24: "Indeed 'the law is holy,' 'every gift of God good,' and 'everything that is created exceedingly good,' as in Gen. 1. But, as stated above, he who has not been brought low, reduced to nothing through the cross and suffering, takes credit for works and wisdom and does not give credit to God. He thus misuses and defiles the gifts of God."
- ⁵ C. S. Lewis, "Reflections on the Psalms," in *The Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1991), 146f.
- ⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 106.
- ⁷ The Large Catechism, II.13 in Kolb and Wengert, 432.
- ⁸ Developed by D. James Kennedy in 1962.
- ⁹ Developed by W. Leroy Biesenthal and published by The Board of Evangelism of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.
- ¹⁰ "Lookin' for Love," the song from which this lyric is taken was written by Wanda Mallette, Bob Morrison, and Patti Ryan, and recorded by American country music singer Johnny Lee.
- ¹¹ "The anthropology of the Lutheran Confessions can be described in terms of two paradoxes, each involving a tension between interrelated contradictions. These paradoxes are summed up in two simul-relationships. To be genuinely and fully human means to be *simul creatus et peccator*, and also to be *simul peccator et iustus*." William W. Schumacher, *Who Do I Say That You Are: Anthropology and the Theology of Theosis in the Finnish School of Tuomo Mannermaa* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 149. A fuller discussion of it is covered on pages 150–172.)
- ¹² Jaroslav Pelikan, "Doctrine of Creation in Lutheran Confessional Theology," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 26, no. 8 (August 1, 1955): 569.
- ¹³ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 61.
- ¹⁴ Elizabeth Gilbert, *The Signature of All Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 497.
- ¹⁷ See Barbara King, "Atheists Feel Awe, Too" *Cosmos & Culture* (blog), August 28, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/13.7/2014/08/28/343952506/atheists-feel-awe-too>.
- ¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, part I, chap. 9, in *God in the Dock*.

Can Anything Good Come Out of _____? Come and See! Faithful Witness in Marginality and Hospitality

Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (Jn 1:46a). Nathanael wonders if God can work his salvation from Galilee. According to human expectations, the Messiah is supposed to come from a higher and holier place like Jerusalem, not from such a lowly and unholy place like Nazareth in Galilee. But God surprises us. “Come and see!” (v. 46b). Philip invites Nathanael to see not with the eyes of the flesh, but with the eyes of the Spirit.

It is precisely from such an unlikely marginal place that the Messiah welcomes sinners into God’s gracious kingdom by saving them from the bondage of sin, death, and the devil. How might such a story help us to engage neighbors out there who can relate to experiences of marginality and hospitality? Furthermore, how might such a story help us to witness faithfully to these neighbors, so that they might see their experiences anew in the light of God’s justification in and through Christ?

In this essay, I argue that our shared human experiences of community and marginality with various neighbors in the world, whether Christian or not, can help us read the Christian story through a fresh lens—in particular, with a view towards people who crave a welcoming hand and suffer hostility and alienation in our communities. Moreover, I argue that these common experiences of belonging and exclusion, of hospitality and marginality, can in turn be illumined, deepened, and transformed by the Christian story in service to a faithful witness to the gospel.

I am asking a two-way question: What can the church learn from her neighbors as she listens to and lives among them? And then, what can neighbors learn from the church as she speaks and lives out the Christian story in their midst? This is the movement of our engagement, first listening and learning, and then speaking and teaching. Faithful witness encompasses both areas. We can think of the former as preparatory in scope or centripetal in trajectory, and the latter as evangelical or centrifugal in aim.

Two Kinds of Signs

As an initial way to frame the questions posed above, I want to appeal to the Apology’s distinction between what I have come to call “two kinds of signs.”¹ Let us

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look at the key text from Apology XIII, which deals more specifically with the number and use of the sacraments.

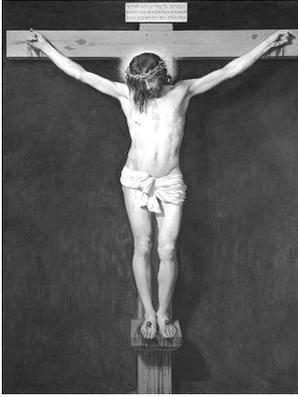
If we define the sacraments as rites, which have the command of God and to which the promise of grace has been added, it is easy to determine what the sacraments are, properly speaking. For humanly instituted rites are not sacraments, properly speaking, because human beings do not have authority to promise grace. Therefore, signs instituted without the command of God are not sure signs of grace, even though they perhaps serve to teach and admonish the common folk.²

Admittedly, the Apology's distinction is more concerned with distinguishing human rites from divine sacraments in order to console consciences with the forgiveness of sins delivered in God's instituted signs of grace. Less developed, however, is reflection on the other "signs instituted without the command of God." The Apology suggests that such signs and their use are not necessarily bad, as long as they are not equated with or obscure the gospel delivered in the sacraments. The text notes that "humanly instituted rites" or "signs" may "perhaps serve to teach and admonish the common folk." They may have a pedagogical purpose in service to the gospel.

So what are these other signs? One example of such a "sign" is the crucifix. We may also speak of the sign's use as its accompanying humanly instituted "rite." In this case, neither the sign nor the rite is a divinely instituted sacrament. We are not commanded by God to have or use a crucifix in the church or at home in order to receive God's grace and mercy in Christ. Having established this central claim of the Apology, we can then ask further: Can the crucifix, or some other artistic representation of the cross, become a useful sign to engage the common folk out there? Can folks out there relate to such a sign in some way in light of their experiences?

For instance, can a person who has experienced hostility and loneliness relate to the fate of the one who hangs on the cross? Could that engagement with a neighbor who is hurting in turn help to remind the church of her own cross-shaped identity, that is, her experience of marginality in a world hostile to the gospel? Finally, can the church's experiences of alienation and rejection she shares with others out there—even if for different reasons—in turn help to deepen her Christian witness to these neighbors? Perhaps through a ministry of solidarity with and support for marginalized peoples in the community, or through the proclamation of the hope of the cross that justifies people by welcoming them into God's kingdom. Listening and learning, speaking and teaching—in these examples, the sign and rite, though not commanded by God, is used pedagogically and evangelically as we walk together with and hear our suffering neighbors in their pains, and bring the hope of the cross to their situation.

An historic example of and insight into the potential use of the sign of the cross is in order. Consider Spanish painter Diego Velázquez's portrait of the crucified Christ from the year 1632. The reception of this image of the cross by the indigenous people of the Americas during the colonial era serves as an illustration of the way an artistic or



cultural sign evokes experiences shared by the common folk. Velázquez's portrait vividly showed the blood of Christ dripping from his head, hands, feet, and side. The symbol spoke to the colonized. Given their experiences of marginality and hostility at the hands of the Spanish, the Amerindians could relate directly to the suffering of the man on the cross. They could see their own painful experiences reflected in that image of Jesus, at times even apart from an explicit knowledge of him as their Savior and Lord. Through this sign, people identified with a dying Christ, one in solidarity with their own pain. Diego Velázquez's bloody Christ, and other similar depictions of the cross in the colonial era, was

received as the Christ who dies and suffers with us.

Although Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936) described *el Cristo de Velázquez* as the tragic image of a Christ who is “always dying without ever dying to give us life,”³ Alberto García has argued that Velázquez's depiction of the crucified Christ does not have to be seen in a defeatist, fatalistic, or masochistic manner. While it is sometimes the case that “the crucified Christ has been misunderstood as a passive symbol of suffering and defeat,” He must finally be seen more actively as the Suffering Servant “who identifies with the suffering of His people to overcome it.”⁴ This evangelical grasp of the sign leads us to see the cross not “as a symbol of defeat,” but as “a clear signpost, a symbol, of God's active presence with us and for us. It is a clear sign that God in the person of Jesus Christ came to stand with His people in their entire human drama.”⁵

Drawing from García's work on the Hispanic experience of suffering in light of the cross, Douglas Rutt has argued that the popular Latin American self-identification with the bloody Christ can be seen as an enduring catechetical legacy of the region to the whole Christian world.⁶ This image of the cross inspired movements of solidarity with indigenous people groups, such as the one spearheaded by Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566), who advocated for their rights and a peaceful and humane way of bringing the gospel to them.⁷ All this took place at a time when the Spanish church was debating whether these Amerindians were to be considered humans created in God's image or animals and thus property. In view of this historic situation, it is not difficult to understand why some neighbors of Hispanic origin might easily identify with a Christ who is always suffering and dying.

Even though one should not reduce the experience of the cross to a sign of Christ's suffering with us, Rutt contends that the image of “the dying Christ” can still function today as “a bridge to a deeper appreciation and understanding of the message of the gospel, namely, that God in Christ identifies with and ultimately redeems us from the human condition of suffering and death.”⁸ The image of the Christ who is suffering with us becomes a sign that, in light of the Latin American experience of suffering, reminds an often individualistic North American church that is more focused on victories than bearing crosses to embody a ministry of accompaniment with those

who experience hostility and alienation.⁹ Rutt points to the common practice in North American churches to display empty crosses on altars as problematic.

Grasping the dying Christ who identifies “with his brothers and sisters in their suffering” becomes nothing less than a legacy and “gift” of Hispanic Christianity to the church—especially in the United States.¹⁰ The implication is that the church can learn to look at the cross in light of the life of marginal peoples who have experienced hostility in the world, moving her towards a ministry of hospitality towards neighbors at the margins of church and society. In this case, the church’s encounter with and work among marginalized folks serves as a corrective to her becoming too comfortable with the values of the world, to her speaking of Christ’s victory on the cross while avoiding bearing the cross with suffering neighbors. Listening and learning from broken neighbors, the church deepens her own understanding of the Christian story.

At the same time, Rutt shows that the Latin American and Hispanic experience of the Christ who is dying “with us” can be deepened or illumined by the church’s confession of the Christ who has already died “for us.”¹¹ In other words, the sign of the cross can be used to teach the gospel more clearly to those without hope, helping them to move from the Christ who only suffers with them all the time to the Christ who has suffered on their behalf in order to redeem them from the alienation from God and neighbor sin brings to our lives and communities. The evangelical use of the sign of the cross serves as a corrective to a potentially fatalistic or hopeless view of life, and instead invites neighbors to see the cross in terms of God’s radical and welcoming love for all people, even for those who have nothing going for them and yet put their trust in the man of the cross. Speaking and teaching the Christian story in all its fullness, the church illumines a potentially ambiguous sign with the certainty of the gospel.

An Immigrant Story

The historic example provided above shows that “humanly instituted rites,” such as the common folk’s appropriation of a crucifix or similar artistic representation, though not signs commanded by God, can after all serve to teach and admonish both the church and neighbors in the world as they encounter one another. Now, what if we could speak for a moment of such rites in a slightly broader context than we have so far? Not in terms of culturally appropriated artifacts or art forms, such as the image of the cross in a painting, but rather in terms of experiences and practices that embody and give meaning to our lives. What if we think of “rites” as those common and defining life “experiences,” and the practices or “rituals” accompanying them? Real life images, as it were, teaching us something about ourselves, both about our human aspirations and struggles.

Two such human experiences are hospitality and marginality, being invited and being left out. As humans created by God for communion, we crave belonging and acceptance. All of us share a common need for friendship, for being included, and thus value welcoming and being welcomed. Hospitality is the practice or ritual that speaks to those aspirations of the human family. But we also experience alienation, isolation, betrayal, and hostility. And, unfortunately, at times we practice such values too, thus showing the dark, sinful side of the human race, the worst in us. We thus feel connect-

ed to others through friendship and the hand of welcome, but also feel marginalized from others when rejected and excluded.

While these experiences are common to all humans, there are also certain groups of people whose lives bring a higher degree of awareness to them. Immigrants are one such group. They experience hospitality and marginality, welcome and hostility, and have to navigate discourses about who belongs and who does not. Are they in or out? When I first came to the United States as an immigrant, I experienced signs of hospitality. For two years, I lived with a family of farmers in the Midwest who welcomed me with open arms in a new country. They took care of this stranger in their midst. Over time, I became one of them, as it were. When they asked me to partake in the regular family rituals of toilet and pigsty cleaning with the rest of the children, I realized right away that I had become a member of the family!

We entered reciprocal relationships in the neighborhood for the common good. Many teachers and students at the local high school often went out of their way to make me feel included and valued as a member of the learning community. Above all, it was by partaking in the rituals of weekly concert, marching, jazz, and pep band rehearsals and performances that I experienced a very strong sense of belonging and community in a strange land. We created music together, which required listening to one another. We needed each other's contributions in order to make music. But I also experienced subtle and crass signs of hostility and alienation in the community. I was reminded that I was not fully in, that I was a stranger after all. I was reminded that I had an accent; in the worst cases, discriminatory jokes and remarks were made against me or people who talked and looked like me. I was not one of them.

Experiences of hospitality and marginality, stories about who belongs and who does not, words about who is in and who is out—experiences immigrants typically go through. As the church meets neighbors in these spaces of hospitality and marginality, and listens to their hopes and struggles, what can she learn from their life stories? And then, how can the church's story, the Christian story, deepen or illuminate these experiences with the gospel?

Learning from a Life Story

To answer those questions, might it not be especially helpful to hear from theologians, whether lay or professional, whose life experiences in the world have made them especially aware of the pain of exclusion and the gift of community? What about exploring some insights from theologians who are themselves immigrants, or members of ethnic or linguistic minorities, or who have lived and worked among such neighbors on a fairly regular basis? By focusing on their experiences of exclusion and welcome, we might learn broader lessons about the human condition that apply to others beyond members of a particular group and begin to ask how the Christian story speaks to such situations.

In his book *Models of Contextual Theology*, Stephen Bevans offers six different ways to think through the relationship between the church and the world. One way is the transcendental model, which starts with “the authenticity of the subject who is try-

ing to express his or her experience as a person of faith and a person in a particular context.”¹² In the transcendental model, “the best person to do theology within a particular context is the subject of that context as such.”¹³

Parting from particular life experiences, theologians then reflect on what these mean in light of the Scriptures and their theological tradition. Broader lessons are then drawn for others, both for the saints in the church and neighbors in the world. The model moves from the particular to the general, from the individual or communal to that which humans share in common.¹⁴ Using this approach, we may say that the experiences of hospitality and marginality of particular individuals or communities in which the theologian lives and works have a broader application. Such events have significance beyond the individuals or communities originally involved, and thus transcend at some level the original context in which such experiences arose.

Bevans suggests a horticultural or garden image to sum up what the transcendental model entails. As he puts it, “a person can be inspired to work in his garden because of the example—or lack thereof—from others working in their own gardens.”¹⁵ Applying this insight to our concern, we may argue that Christians can learn much about interacting with people in the world who are marginalized and crave friendship when they see and hear from brothers and sisters who have those aspirations and needs on a consistent basis, when they live and work most closely among them, and/or when they themselves come from those communities.

Take for instance the Hispanic experience of *mestizaje*, that is, the coming together of races and cultures as a result of the conquest and colonization of the Americas. Justo González, Protestant Hispanic historian and theologian, has reflected on what such an experience of Hispanic origins—one that is not without its fair share of violence—means not only for Hispanics but also for the church at large today. While unique to Hispanics, González argues that the experience of *mestizaje* transcends Hispanic culture. It has implications for others. If so, we have an example of Bevans’s transcendental model at work.¹⁶

González has argued that being a Hispanic or *mestizo* Christian is an ambivalent, both/and reality, a bittersweet event.¹⁷ Bittersweet because *mestizaje* resulted from a violent evangelization, in which the cross and the sword went hand in hand. In other words, *mestizaje* comes from a painful experience of hostility and shame, an experience of marginality. But, being a *mestizo* is also and ultimately, under the sign of the cross, a sweet event. A new creation still came about in spite of violence and death. Life out of death. By his mysterious design, God brought together into one a new people, extending his mercy to outsiders, transforming their shame into the joy of being brought into the family of God, an experience of divine embrace to be celebrated. God’s inclusion in his kingdom breaks into fiesta. In the new creation, outsiders are invited to have fellowship with the Lord and partake of his meal.

González’s hymn “*De los cuatro rincones del mundo*” (“From the Four Corners of the Earth”) sums up well what the theologian sees as the broader implications of the experience of *mestizaje* for the church, her identity and hope. The first stanza reads:

From the four corners of the earth
Flow the blood in these veins
Of these peoples who sing their pains,
Of these peoples who speak their faith;
Unwitting blood brought from Spain,
Noble blood of the suffering native,
Strong blood of the oppressed slave,
All blood surely bought on the cross.¹⁸

Here González reimagines the Hispanic experience of *mestizaje*, the coming together of the blood from many continents to form a new people, as a sign in creation of the church catholic that is gathered from “the four corners of the earth.” One notes how, for the hymn writer, the Hispanic experience of *mestizaje* deepens the church’s understanding of her own identity as a catholic or universal church, which in turn reminds her to live according to her identity as a global church of many languages and cultures. The church learns that she herself is *mestizo*. She is neither monocultural nor monolingual.

At the end of the stanza, note also how the church’s understanding of her catholicity or *mestizo* identity in turns illuminates the Hispanic experience of *mestizaje*, making it clear to people who experience hostility and shame from others because of their skin color, ethnicity, accent, or language that the gospel is for all nations, all ethnic and language groups. We see how the gospel also deepens the experience of *mestizaje*, giving it a fresh meaning in light of the cross. Christ shed his blood to redeem all blood. Another stanza reads:

From the four corners of the earth,
From the flowery fields of Cuba,
From Asia and the coast of Africa,
From Borinquen, Quisqueya, and Aztlán:
To this blessed hour has brought us
Heaven’s mysterious divine design,
Which all brought together into one destiny
And from all one reign will create.¹⁹

In this stanza, González speaks to the experience of God’s inclusion of the *mestizo*—again, a sign of the church catholic—into his reign. By “heaven’s mysterious divine design,” God brings about the *mestizo* people from the blood of many nations and lands. They do not only share a common destiny of pain and alienation, but also, in light of the Christ whose blood redeems all blood, a common hope of being invited and welcomed into God’s kingdom. Once again, we see how the gospel deepens the experience of *mestizaje* in light of the cross and the hope of the new creation, going as far as calling such a human experience a “blessed hour”: Sweetness out of bitterness.

Reading Through Marginal Eyes

It is now time to go to the Scriptures, the Christian story, and ask how common experiences of hospitality and marginality we share with neighbors might offer us an important lens to see insights in the biblical narratives we would otherwise miss or jump over. And then, let us ask how these biblical narratives illumine or deepen such experiences in light of the gospel. Three narratives come to mind.

Jesus the Galilean

Mexican-American Catholic theologian Virgilio Elizondo argues that Jesus is ultimately rejected, marginalized, and killed because he is the wrong kind of Jew, a Galilean Jew.²⁰ No self-respecting Jew expected the Messiah to come from Galilee. One recalls the words of Nathanael upon hearing of the Messiah from Philip: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (Jn 1:46a). The expected answer at the time would have been “no.” The center of God’s holy presence is Jerusalem. There is where we find the temple, the righteous teachers of Israel, the pure Jews—not in Galilee. Yet God surprises us and works his salvation out of Galilee, out of the margins, as it were. Along with Nathanael, we are invited by Philip to “come and see” what God is doing out of Nazareth in Galilee (v. 46b).

Christ’s disciples are also from Galilee. They include people who, like Jesus the Galilean, speak with an accent, like his disciple Peter whose accent gave him away as a follower of Jesus! (Mt 26:73). They are sent into the world to make disciples of all nations. While Jerusalem is typically seen as the center from which the gospel is to go out to the ends of the earth from Pentecost forward, according to the narrative in Acts, Galilee is actually such a central place in Matthew (28:7–10, 16)—the least likely place from which the Lord of heaven and earth might send his disciples to make disciples by baptizing and teaching (vv. 18–20). When read through marginal eyes, the story of Jesus the Galilean and his Galilean disciples bears witness to the outworking of God’s power and wisdom through the cross, and this in turns allows us to see how God can work his salvation even in and out of the most unlikely places, among marginal characters with strange accents, and even use them to extend his kingdom.

Jesus Walks along the Border

Galileans and Samaritans were seen with suspicion. Galileans lived too close to Greek-speaking people and were not considered to be as pure as the Jerusalem Jews. Samaritans were worst off, the enemies of God’s people, totally unfit to receive God’s blessings. So goes the story. But shockingly, Jesus walks along the despised border between Samaria and Galilee (Lk 17:11). We have other marginal characters in this story too—lepers, and at least one of them, a Samaritan. Marginalized twice, this person has nothing going for him. He is unclean, an outcast.

It is interesting that, after being healed, only one out of ten lepers returned to give thanks. That person, shockingly, is the foreigner! (v. 16). The one Jew might think least likely to be brought into the kingdom is welcomed into it. Exclusion is overcome by embrace. This is a story of outsiders who are included into the kingdom of God through

faith in Jesus alone. It is a story of marginality and then, through Christ, of hospitality. When read through marginal eyes, the story of the Jesus who walks along the border bears witness to the power of the gospel to save people not on the basis of their condition in life, their religious purity, cleanliness, or holiness, but on the basis of faith in Christ.

The Story of Philip in Acts

Philip is a deacon and then an evangelist among marginal characters, amidst people excluded at some level from the community because of their cultural-linguistic or ethnic-religious identity. These people include Greek-speaking Jewish widows who are not fully accepted or apparently are being “neglected” by Hebrew-speaking Jews in the distribution of food (Acts 6:1). Philip is also sent by the Spirit to Samaritans who are not seen by the Jews as worthy of receiving God’s blessings (8:1–8), and to an Ethiopian eunuch who, though a God-fearer, would not have been allowed in the temple (8:27). Are these people in or out of God’s kingdom?

Philip’s is a story about the Holy Spirit’s breaking down humanly designed barriers to bring the gospel of Christ and baptism in his name to the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 2:38). This is a story of marginality and then, through the Holy Spirit, of hospitality and welcoming into God’s family. The gospel has a ripple, centrifugal effect. It goes from Jerusalem to unlikely and despised places like Samaria. Such an extension of the gospel is so surprising and perhaps even shocking that an apostolic representation from Jerusalem has to go to Samaria to lay hands on the newly converted and baptized Christians in order to confirm, bear witness, or perhaps even witness themselves that the gift of the Spirit is also for such unlikely people (8:14–17).

How can these biblical narratives shape our witness? First, we recognize that neighbors out there can connect at some level with these stories. They have felt welcomed and unwelcomed. Who are those neighbors in our neck of the woods? Who are the Galileans, lepers, Samaritans, or Greek-speaking Jewish widows in our churches or communities? Christians who work among immigrants, minorities, the sick and dying, the lonely, or other marginalized groups can use these stories to connect with them. They provide some common ground for listening and learning about the struggles and needs of neighbors. They provide a common human story, as it were, to engage those who feel lonely, rejected, or outcast.

But these biblical stories also complement those experiences of marginality with the light and hope of God’s grace in Christ, providing a new perspective on life for the outsiders in our midst. They are truly new stories when seen through the cross. What they offer, then, is a view of God’s gracious disposition towards marginal people. The Holy Spirit moves the church outside Jerusalem to places with odd characters. Are they in or out? This is not our decision. God alone justifies them through the word and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus of Nazareth has extended his healing hand, the hand of hospitality and inclusion into God’s gracious reign, to sinners excluded by all who boast in their own righteousness. He also makes such sinners, like Levi the tax collector, participants in his mission: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Lk 5:31–32).

Deepening the Story: Speaking Justification

Some time ago, during the Epiphany season, I preached a homily on John 1:45–46 (Nathanael said to Philip, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”) at Concordia Seminary. Let me share with you the last half of that homily as an example of an engagement between the text and the world. I approach the biblical narrative as a first-generation Hispanic Lutheran immigrant. I preach it to a predominantly Anglo audience aware of but largely detached in time from its Synod’s immigrant roots, an Anglo audience that also has a heart for missions—or at least is aware of its importance—among the growing immigrant and/or ethnically diverse population of the United States. Finally, note how I use the immigrant experience of marginality to remind the church of her own marginal identity in the world and her mission to be a faithful witness to those who feel excluded from the love of God in Christ.²¹ In so doing, I also remind the church of her central message for herself and for the world—namely, that God justifies not on the basis of our condition in life but on the basis of the cross. Here is a slightly edited version of the last half of the homily:

We too are like Nathanael. At times, we are doubtful about the power of Jesus to save and transform lives among strange people and in places where we least expect it. Can anything good come out of _____ (fill in the blank)? When we do so, we see with the eyes of the flesh, we do not see Jesus at work in the most unlikely places. We are a bit suspicious or cautiously optimistic. We are no longer open to being surprised by God’s power among unlikely folks and places.

But when we trust in God as people called by Jesus, and see life with the eyes of the Holy Spirit, the eyes of faith, we are more like Philip in the text for today. We see Jesus in Galilee. We are pleasantly surprised and can see God’s salvation at work in places where at first it seemed odd or impossible to find his power and wisdom.

Who are some of the Galileans of our time? Yes, God is working even among peoples with strange accents and customs, from strange places, people who do not always neatly fit into our cultural norms or congregational life, whom God has called to serve in the church to bring the gospel of life to a hurting world. Jesus is at work in modern Galilee and is blessing our church through modern Galileans from strange lands, bringing God’s word and new life against all odds in places where some Lutheran congregations are even wondering if they should close their doors.

Sometimes we forget that our Lord came from Galilee and that the church is at its very core a bunch of Galilean people. Modern Galileans with accents remind Lutherans in the United States of their own origins, for the Lutheran church too was once a church of Galileans with accents and strange customs and traditions . . . And yet God worked his salvation through these Germans and through their descendants has brought the gospel of life to many of us sitting here today.

But more than that, the modern Galileans with accents also remind us of our own Christian identity, for the church has always been a little group of strange Galilean disciples that does not speak or act like the world does. What is the church but a little Galilean flock that is ridiculed and persecuted by the world because it sings to a different tune and walks to a different drumbeat? To the world, you sound like a people with strange accents and customs. And yet God has revealed his salvation, his power and wisdom, for the sake of the world, through people who in the eyes of the world are nothing, insignificant, weak, and foolish. Through you.

Through modern Galileans like our Hispanic Lutheran brothers and sisters—and yes through Philip—God is inviting us again to be the Galilean church he has called us to be, the community where God still does surprising and mighty things in unlikely places and through unlikely people like you.

Hey Philip: Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Out of Galilee? Well yes, Nathanael. Yes. Open your eyes. It is happening right now, right here . . . in this old Lutheran church. “Come and see.” It’s a Galilean Epiphany! ²²

Let me suggest that all the biblical stories shared above function as stories of God’s justification in and through Christ. They remind us of what Oswald Bayer once called “the ontological significance of justification,”²³ which means that every single human being seeks to be justified by someone, and therefore justify his or her own life in this world. As Bayer puts it: “It is not true that judgment is an addition to being. What I am, I am in my judgment about myself, intertwined with the judgment made of me by others.”²⁴ Even the claim that I do not need to be justified by anyone is itself yet another attempt at justification. Ultimately, neither reason nor works, neither theodicy nor praxis, can justify us, but only God’s unconditional word of justification in Christ.²⁵

In our reading of the biblical narratives through marginal eyes, we are reminded that people are not brought into God’s kingdom because of their language, culture, ethnicity, place of origin, or any other condition in life. Man is not justified by these things, but only through faith in Christ. Without saying the word “justification” once, all these stories of God’s welcoming inclusion of marginal characters into his kingdom through Christ teach us that man is not deemed worthy or unworthy of the kingdom on the basis of his pedigree, but on the basis of God’s mercy in Christ. This realization radically shapes how we live among and interact with people who are marginalized, leading us to embrace the apostolic teaching on hospitality with new vigor.

In conclusion, we may ask: What other marginal spaces can we learn from and in turn illumine or deepen experiences of hostility and hospitality today with the message of God’s sure sign of justification in Christ? To name a few relatively recent groups in our collective memory, I think of Christian minorities being persecuted in Iraq and other parts of the world, who are experiencing the care and hospitality of humanitarian agencies and Christian groups. I think of unaccompanied minors along the United

States-Mexico border, including Christians, who are in many cases fleeing persecution in their own homelands, and are caught in the middle of a heated national debate on immigration law and reform that, though important, seems to go nowhere and often vilifies these minors. And yet, they are still experiencing in many cases the hospitality of people in the United States through social agencies, including Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services working in partnership with individuals and congregations nationwide. Closer to Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, I think of Ferguson, Missouri, where we have seen both signs of hostility and hospitality, alienation and community, including an outpouring of Christian support for suffering neighbors through prayer, donations, advocacy, and community dialogue. These responses of solidarity in listening and then speaking become, in the light of Christ, a mirror that reflects our Lord's self-identification with suffering people and invitation to them to taste and see his salvation.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that faithful witness in hospitality and marginality will include first listening and learning from the ambiguous signs, rites, or experiences of marginal neighbors in our midst who find no ultimate justification for life in this world. This stage is critical, even if preparatory in scope and centripetal in trajectory. It promotes a certain concern for and solidarity with suffering neighbors, as well as a holy discontent with the alienation sin creates among them in our churches and communities. Secondly, such witness will include speaking and teaching in such marginal spaces, deepening shared experiences of exclusion and welcome in this world with the Christian story. Such encounters will lead to opportunities for admonishing the folk by calling them to repentance those who boast in their righteousness, but also for proclaiming the gospel of justification to sinners who crave for the kingdom, and for embodying a life shaped by the gospel in service to the neediest in our midst.

At an institutional level, such life will include models of church and ministry that thrive not only in places of material abundance, but also in marginal places. It will include strategic ways of highlighting the contributions of folks in borderlands regions to the church at large, including their theological and pastoral reflections on the Christian story and its implications for catechesis, worship, mission, service in society, and life together.²⁶ At every opportunity, the church will be invited to come and see what the Lord is doing in today's Galilee, wherever that may be. She will be invited to walk with Jesus along the border between Samaria and Galilee, and see how Jesus heals and restores lives where no one else wants to show up. She will be invited to move outside of her Jerusalem comfort zone and behold what the Holy Spirit is doing in Judea, Samaria, and other unlikely places not only abroad, but also in the borderlands of our own backyards. This is the evangelical stage of a faithful witness proper, centrifugal in its content and aim.

Endnotes

¹ Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., "Theology in Context: Music as a Test Case," *Concordia Journal* 38/3 (2012): 211–213.

² Apology of the Augsburg Confession XIII, 3, *The Book of Concord, The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

³ Alberto L. García, “The Witness to the Cross in Light of the Hispanic Experience,” in *The Theology of the Cross for the 21st Century: Signposts for a Multicultural Witness*, ed. Alberto L. García and A. R. Victor Raj (St. Louis: Concordia, 2002). García cites Unamuno’s *The Tragic Sense in Humanity and the People* (189–190).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁶ Douglas L. Rutt, “Luther, Tentatio, and Latin America,” *LOGIA: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 19/1 (Epiphany 2010): 7–11 (esp. 10–11). This LOGIA issue highlights theological contributions from Latin American and US Latino Lutheranism, was produced in partnership with the Center for Hispanic Studies (CHS) of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and guest edited by its director, Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 106.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107. According to Bevans, “this model rests in the conviction that while every person is truly historically and culturally conditioned in terms of the content of thought, the human mind nevertheless operates in identical ways in all cultures and at all periods of history . . . No matter where one knows or when one knows, one begins to process in experience, organizes this experience by means of concepts, judges the truth or falsity of one’s conceptual understanding in judgment, and integrates the knowledge arrived at in judgment by means of a decision.”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 113–116. Bevans includes González under this model, highlighting his proposal to deepen major themes in the Christian tradition by looking at them through Hispanic eyes. Bevans focuses on Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990).

¹⁷ See Justo González’s address delivered at the 1st Hispanic National Convention of the LCMS in *Under the Cross of Christ—Yesterday, Today, and Forever: Reflections on Lutheran Hispanic Ministry in the United States* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Publications, 2004), 23–46.

¹⁸ Justo L. González, “De los cuatro rincones del mundo” (#450), in *Libro de Liturgia y Cántico* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998 (translation mine)).

¹⁹ *Ibid.* (translation mine)

²⁰ Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983). See also Timothy Matovina, ed., *Beyond Borders: Writings of Virgilio Elizondo and Friends* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 143–186.

²¹ North American theologians have also asked what ethnic immigrants might teach the whole church in the United States. See, for example, Mark Griffin and Theron Walker, *Living on the Borders: What the Church Can Learn from Ethnic Immigrant Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004). Drawing on the work of Virgilio Elizondo, the authors argue the church in the United States should see herself as a “rooted diaphora” or “borderlands culture.” This ecclesial identity, which is analogous to the identity of immigrants as borderlands peoples, will preserve the church from falling into either an increasing privatization of her faith (complete isolation) or a growing capitulation to the values of a consumerist society (complete assimilation).

²² For the video and audio of the full homily and a discussion of its intended audience and goal with Dr. David Schmitt, Gregg H. Benidt Chair in Homiletics and Literature at Concordia Seminary, go to The Preacher’s Studio section of ConcordiaTheology.org. The link is: <http://concordiatheology.org/2013/04/the-preachers-studio-leo-sanchez>.

²³ Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), xi–xiv.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 9–25.

²⁶ For more reflections and proposals on how The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) could incorporate the lives and insights of members and church workers from marginal spaces or borderlands regions into their mission, vision, planning, and structure, see the final sections of my two previous articles “The Global South Meets North America: Confessional Lutheran Identity In Light of Changing Christian Demographics,” *Concordia Journal* 37/1 (2011): 47–54, and “Toward and Ecclesiology of Catholic Unity and Mission in the Borderlands: Reflections from a Lutheran Latino Theologian,” *Concordia Journal* 35/1 (2009): 31–32.

Faithful Witness in Suffering and Joy

Jeffrey A. Oswald

I have learned, over the years, not to ask people to close their eyes, even for a moment, while I'm speaking, but I do need to risk a moment of quiet reverie here with you this morning. If you can do this without closing your eyes, all the better. Either way, I want you to recall the moments in your life when you feel you truly experienced joy. I will not ask you to reveal these moments to anyone, so please do not set about compiling a list fit for small group sharing. In fact, I want you to forget that you are attending a theological symposium at the moment, forget that you are on a seminary campus, forget who's setting next to you, and forget who's standing here speaking. When in your life have you experienced a moment of true joy?

Now, let me ask you, how do you know that what you experienced was joy? What were you searching for as you reviewed a lifetime full of experiences? What is joy?

Do We Know Joy?

Are We "Joy Experts"?

I began work on this paper where I begin work on most research projects: in our library. For this topic, however, I was not only interested in finding resources that might help me prepare this presentation, I was also curious to see how resources on "joy" are arranged, so I did a "subject search." As I expected, and you probably would too, the largest number of entries under "joy" in our library came in the subdivisions having to do with "Christianity" and "Biblical Teaching" on joy, but, by totaling all of the entries under "joy," I came up with a list of about twenty-two titles. I have it on good authority that our library collection consists of roughly 280,000 titles. What with nearly one out of every 13,000 books devoted to our topic, it's clear that our seminary is all but obsessed with the idea of joy.

All of this, of course, is leading to a consideration of the question of whether or not we are qualified to speak about joy—at all. Do we, theologians, pastors, teachers, deaconesses, elders, lay people—do we Christians even know what joy is, and do we deserve to be heard when we speak about it?

One response to the results of the catalog search could and probably should be

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that we don't need shelves full of books to know what joy is because we have the one book that truly and reliably reveals joy to all who seek joy between its covers. The Bible is filled with passages on joy, not only commanding us to rejoice but also describing the nature of joy and the things that bring joy.

Joy comes from the Lord. It is the Lord who fills the psalmist's heart with joy (Ps 4:7), the Lord who is our exceeding joy (Ps 43:4). Joy is a fruit of the Lord's Spirit (Gal 5:22), for the Lord's presence brings joy (Ps 21:6)—where he is there fullness of joy will be found, at his right hand are pleasures eternal (Ps 16:11). His testimonies are joy (Ps 119:111), and his word is the joy, the delight, of our hearts (Jer 15:16). The announcement of the birth of God's Son is good news of great joy (Lk 2:10), and the coming of the message of salvation in this Son fills people with great joy (Acts 8:39)—and it fills all heaven with joy, too (Lk 15:7). The reign of God is joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17). This list could go on and on, for, as both Pollyanna and our synodical president know, there is “joy and rejoicing everywhere” when we open our Scriptures and read.¹

The Bible speaks of joy in more concrete, sensuous—and sensual—terms as well. Not only is there joy to be found in the fellowship of believers, in “going up to the house of the Lord” (Ps 122:1), but there is joy in “eating the fat and drinking the sweet” (Neh 8:10). Wine gladdens the heart (Ps 104:15), as does a bountiful harvest (Is 9:3)—the fertile pastures, meadows, and valleys themselves sing for joy (Ps 65:12–13). Nor are the forests to be out sung (Ps 96:12). There is joy in the growth of a strong nation (Is 9:3) and joy in the conception of a child (1 Sam 2:1). There is happiness to be found in keeping the law (Prv 29:18), just as there is in showing generosity to the poor (Prv 14:21). A man finds delight in the body of his wife, and in love there is intoxication (Prv 5:19). The Lord fills our mouths with laughter, and our tongues sing for joy (Ps 126:2). We rejoice with joy inexpressible (1 Pt 1:8).

At least, that's what the Bible says, but does having all of this in our Bibles really make us “joy experts”? Is reading about joy in the Bible the same as knowing joy? Are our churches filled with the fullness of joy? Are our homes? Are our hearts?

Are We “Joy Experts”?

The world has certainly rarely thought of us as “joy experts.” Friedrich Nietzsche said of the Christians of his day that they would have to sing better songs if he were to believe in their Redeemer—and they'd have to look a lot more redeemed.² Are we as joyless as our Scriptures are joyful? In his summary of Christian teaching as he understood it, Lin Yutang (林語堂) wrote, “All in all, there is still a belief in total depravity, that enjoyment of this life is sin and wickedness, that to be uncomfortable is to be virtuous.”³

In my first draft of the outline, I raised the question of whether we are “joy experts” or “joy exorcists.” Rather than certified teachers of all things joyful are we instead “the exorcist” who suddenly appears in silhouette at the entrance to the world's party and casts out joy as if it were an unclean spirit, leaving the formerly joyful thrash-

ing about on the floor and ready to throw themselves into the fire? After some additional thought, however, I decided not to pursue that question. I'm sure I would not have had to search long to find the movies, books, blogs, and cartoons to show the popularity of such a view, but I think the picture of the Christian as the "joy exorcist," as the "cosmic killjoy," is a caricature. Although it could be helpful to ask from what features of the Christian face the caricaturists have drawn their inspiration, that picture, like all caricatures, would show itself in the end to be mostly exaggeration. I regarded as more worthy of exploration together here the question you see on your outlines: Are we not "experts" but "expats" when it comes to joy?

"Expats," short for "expatriates," can refer to those driven or banished from their native land, but it more commonly refers to those living outside their native land for any reason. The mere suggestion of the metaphor suddenly calls to mind a rather different set of passages from Scripture that have to do with joy: "Even in laughter the heart may ache, and the end of joy may be grief" (Prv 14:13); "All joy has grown dark; the gladness of the earth is banished" (Is 24:11); "The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning" (Lam 5:15). And it probably doesn't help our argument that the Greek word connected to the root for our English word joy is not found in the Bible, but more on vocabulary in a moment.

There, then, is a kind of one-two punch that, according to our opponent anyway, knocks us out of contention for the title of "joy expert." We do not know joy ourselves, nor will we allow the world its own joy. We are like Pharisees that shut the kingdom of joy in people's faces; we neither enter ourselves nor do we allow anyone else to enter. For it is a rare Christian book on joy, I discovered, that has anything to say about the world's joys other than to note their vanity, deception, emptiness, and sinfulness. Why should the world care what we have to say about joy, even if we made the effort to find the words or the way to speak to them about it?

Are we "joy expats"? "Joy exiles"? Is that what the narrative that shapes our identity and guides our living has become? That we once, long ago and far away, inhabited a paradise of joy, but that our sin "shivered and blackened all that," but that Jesus came to suffer and die that we might have the promise of joy again, and that we look forward once more to a time of joy restored? Has David's heartsick plea to God to restore to him the joy of salvation become in our praying of it a prayer for the last day? What of us second- and third-generation exiles who have no experience of our ancient homeland, no memory upon which to build the hope of restoration? "Joy," we tell ourselves, "comes in the morning," but will the morning ever come?

In 1970, Martin Franzmann published a small collection of prayers entitled *Pray for Joy*.⁴ I use it on almost a weekly basis, so I've come to know the collection of prayers it contains fairly well. As I was thinking about this paper, it suddenly struck me that there is no prayer in the book called "Pray for Joy" or even "A Prayer for Joy." Joy is mentioned in the title of two of the thirty-one prayers, "To Find Joy in Life's Trials" and "Joy in the Gift of Exaltation," but, ironically, the word joy does not appear in the second of those prayers. I can find the word only three times in the whole book, once in the prayer that we "joy in our trials,"⁵ once in a paraphrase of Job 38:7 ("when the

sons of God shouted for joy”),⁶ and once in a prayer that Christ would give a newly married couple his “bounteous wine of joy.”⁷ That hardly seems enough to justify the title of the collection. Franzmann’s preface provides at least a clue to help in solving this mystery, and may even suggest a hint of double-entendre. He explains that praying constantly and giving thanks in all circumstances are not only God’s will for us, those activities are “a great help toward fulfilling that injunction which for us melancholy myopics of the 1970s is the most difficult of all: ‘Rejoice always.’”⁸ Franzmann’s well-chosen title, then, suggests the double truth that the church must always be praying that God would grant her joy and that joyful people will never stop praying, never cease to give thanks, because of their joy.

We “melancholy myopics” of the twenty-first century are in the same situation. Hardly experts on the subject of joy, we can at least become students of joy and supplicants of joy, and someday, perhaps, even coworkers of joy. To that end, let’s return to the question of definition.

Joy and Her Opposite(s)

One way to define a thing is, of course, to say what it is not, to define it by giving its opposite. The title and theme of this presentation might suggest that joy’s opposite is suffering. I will say a little bit more about suffering in my conclusion, but, for now, let us simply note that if we know anything at all about joy from a biblical perspective we know that its opposite is not suffering. If that were the case, Scriptures’ reports that people rejoiced in their sufferings and Scriptures’ commands that we rejoice in our sufferings would be reduced to nonsense.

I suggest that we first take a step back and look at the word used among ancient Greek speakers outside the biblical world from which our word *joy* ultimately developed. That word was γάμος, εὐχ, τό, with the related verbs γαίω, γάνυμαι and γηθέω. The number of usage citations for these words given in the lexicon suggests that they were probably not extremely common. What caught my eye about this family of words, however, was a definition of the adjective that was provided by Hesychius () of Alexandria (fifth or sixth century AD). He defined *joyful* by using three other adjectives: λευκόν, , and . According to Hesychius, joyful is defined by these three characteristics: “light or bright, pleasant or sweet, cheerful or merry or gracious.”⁹ Joy’s opposite is not suffering, but it is found in what is gloomy and dark, bitter, cheerless, sorrowful, and ungracious.

Now, my office dictionary defines *dog* as “a domesticated, carnivorous mammal of many varieties.”¹⁰ It’s no easy task to take that definition out on the street with you and use it to identify a real, live dog. In the same way, dictionary definitions alone can hardly be enough for us to know real, live joy when we meet it on the street. For that reason, I enlisted the aid of a dialogue partner, and a most unlikely one at that.

Joy in the World

I came across *The Importance of Living* by Lin Yutang several months ago when I was looking for something else in the library. I decided to take it home and read again

his essay on Christian, Greek, and Chinese views of mankind. Having finished that, I was planning to return the book when I noticed his essay entitled “The Problem of Happiness.” Since the assignment of this paper had turned happiness into a problem for me, I thought it might be worth taking a look, and it was. (I still hope, by the way, to get to his essay “The Importance of Loafing,” but I should probably let the next presenter read that first.)

Lin Yutang was born in Fujian (福建) province in mainland China in 1895. What makes him such an interesting and valuable conversation partner is the rich diversity of “places and promises” in which he lived out his life. Born the son of a Christian pastor, Lin Yutang later wandered away from his faith, turning to Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism for help in determining what it meant to be a young, Chinese man in the early 1900s. Later in life, he would return to the way in which his Christian parents had brought him up. He studied in Shanghai and at Harvard and in Germany. He worked in France and taught in Beijing. He finally settled in the United States, but he was buried in Taiwan. He introduced humor into contemporary Chinese literature. He invented a Chinese typewriter. He produced an outstanding Chinese dictionary. All in all, he seemed an ideal person to consult on the question of the meaning and nature of joy. At the time he wrote this essay, he did not regard himself as a Christian, but I think you will find his thoughts very provocative in light of some of the things we’ve heard from previous presenters. Lin writes:

It is strange that this problem of happiness, which is the great question occupying the minds of all pagan philosophers, has been entirely neglected by Christian thinkers. The great question that bothers theological minds is not human happiness, but human “salvation”—a tragic word. The word has a bad flavor for me, because in China I hear everyday someone talking about our “national salvation.” Everybody is trying to “save” China. [Lin is writing these words in the late 1930s.] It suggests the feeling of a people on a sinking ship, a feeling of ultimate doom and the best method of getting away alive. Christianity, which has been described as “the last sigh of two dying worlds” (Greek and Roman), still retains something of that characteristic today in its preoccupation with the question of salvation. The question of living is forgotten in the question of getting away alive from this world. . . . Theological minds are so much occupied with salvation, and so little with happiness, that all they can tell us about the future is that there will be a vague heaven, and when questioned about what we are going to do there and how we are going to be happy in heaven, they have only ideas of the vaguest sort, such as singing hymns and wearing white robes.¹¹

What, then, is happiness for Lin? He begins by saying that “all human happiness is sensuous happiness”; and he means that quite literally, for he explains: “Happiness for me is largely a matter of digestion.”¹² He is not trying to make light of the subject, rather he is trying to point out that he has never been able to understand or make a distinction between “spiritual” and “physical” happiness or pleasure.

Just as it is impossible for me to say whether I love my children physically or spiritually when I hear their chattering voices or when I see their plump legs, so I am totally unable to distinguish between the joys of the mind and the joys of the flesh. Does anybody ever love a woman spiritually without loving her physically? And is it so easy a matter for a man to analyze and separate the charms of the woman he loves—things like laughter, smiles, a way of tossing one's head, a certain attitude toward things?¹³

Lin makes no apologies for this approach to life and joy, an approach he calls “materialism”: “I am such a materialist that at any time I would prefer pork to poetry, and would waive a piece of philosophy for a piece of filet, brown and crisp and garnished with a good sauce.”¹⁴ Lin argues that what we think of as mental or spiritual pleasures are either at the same time and in their essence sensuous pleasures or they are dangerous things that can easily deprive us of the “feeling of life” and leave us with a world where we have “knowledge without understanding, criticism without appreciation, beauty without love, truth without passion, righteousness without mercy, and courtesy without a warm heart.”¹⁵

One of the most fascinating parts of Lin's description of this “feast of life” is the inclusion of a list of thirty-three happy moments from the seventeenth-century writer Jin Shengtan (金聖嘆). We don't have time here to read through the whole list, but listen to a few of these “happy moments,” mentally comparing them with your own list (which I hope you haven't forgotten).

To cut with a sharp knife a bright green watermelon on a big scarlet plate of a summer afternoon. Ah, is this not happiness?

To open a window and let a wasp out of the room. Ah, is this not happiness?

A traveler returns home after a long journey, and he sees the old city gate and hears the women and children on both banks of the river talking his own dialect. Ah, is this not happiness?

To find accidentally a handwritten letter of some old friend in a trunk. Ah, is this not happiness?

It is a hot day in June when the sun hangs still in the sky and there is not a whiff of wind or air, nor a trace of clouds; the front and back yards are hot like an oven and not a single bird dares to fly about. Perspiration flows down my whole body in little rivulets. There is the noon-day meal before me, but I cannot take it for the sheer heat. I ask for a mat to spread on the ground and lie down, but the mat is wet with moisture and flies swarm about to rest on my nose and refuse to be driven away. Just at this moment when I am completely helpless, suddenly there is a rumbling of thunder and big sheets of black clouds overcast the sky and come majestically on like a great army advancing to battle. Rain water begins to pour down from the eaves like a cataract. The perspiration stops. The clamminess of the ground is gone. All flies disappear to hide themselves and I can eat my rice. Ah, is this not happiness?

To hear our children recite the classics so fluently, like the sound of pouring water from a vase. Ah, is this not happiness?

And one more:

I have nothing to do after a meal and try to go through the things in some old trunks. I see there are dozens or hundreds of I.O.U.'s from people who owe my family money. Some of them are dead and some still living, but in any case there is no hope of their returning the money. Behind people's backs I put them together in a pile and make a bonfire of them, and I look up to the sky and see the last trace of smoke disappear. Ah, is this not happiness?¹⁶

Is this not happiness? How did Jin's list compare with yours? Would you have found joy in these moments?

Joy in the Kingdom

When I composed my own list of my life's moments of joy, I was struck by how few of those moments were experiences that I thought of "theologically." When I then asked myself about the most important moments in my life that I do frame in theological terms, I realized that the feelings I associated with them were things like awe, humility, guilt/shame/contrition, faith and trust, enlightenment and understanding, and peace. My experiences of joy were remarkably similar to Lin's description and had much more to do with "eating the fat and drinking the sweet," with meeting my wife for the first time, seeing her smile, hearing her laugh, watching her walk across the quad in front of Mundinger Hall; with late nights spent with good friends; with babies and grandbabies; with finding the perfect word or the perfect font; with hearing the perfect end to a story or hearing for the first time that melody that haunts you for the rest of your life. These joys did not distance me from my fellow human beings; rather, they brought us together in ways that could have easily united perfect strangers in a moment of common joy.

This realization, however, was not an entirely joyous one. Was Lin right? *Completely* right? Was I—and/or us and/or my faith—mistaken? I laid my list of Bible verses alongside Jin's list of happy moments. What was I missing? A new and fuller realization began to dawn. Ah, is this not happiness?

The realization is hardly a new one; at least I can claim no originality in coming to it. It was there before me all the while:

For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy. (Ps 92:4)

Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Happy is the man who takes refuge in him! (Ps 34:8)

What struck me as the common feature among all of these moments of happiness, what transcended any division into spiritual or physical, what broke down a false dichotomy between life and salvation, what brought all of the pieces together for me

in joyful harmony was that all of these moments were experiences of the goodness of God. I could find no joy in my list, in my biblical list, in my friend Lin's list, that was not the result of the experience of God's goodness: it was there in the taste of a perfect wine, in the wag of a dog's tail, in the beauty of a person's eyes, in the music of a person's laugh, in justice, in forgiveness, and yes, even in suffering. It all and always springs from the goodness of God.

Faithful Witnesses

As we head into "Part II" which is really my conclusion, we must first talk about the other idea built into the theme of this presentation—not "suffering"—but "witness."

Witnessing According to the Acts of the Apostles

When we hear the term "witness" in a biblical or church or theological context, we almost invariably think immediately of speaking. "Witnessing" means telling others about Jesus, we think. But common sense tells us that witnessing cannot begin with speaking. A witness can only speak after he has seen or heard something. And that is a pattern we see brought out quite clearly in the book of Acts. If we want to be able to draw some conclusions about being "faithful witnesses" in any situation, it will be of great help to us to pause for a moment and trace the outlines of that pattern.

The pattern becomes especially clear once the news of Jesus travels beyond the city limits of Jerusalem, and Luke's two great figures are his two best examples of what it means to be a witness. How does Peter, for instance, come to be at the house of Cornelius (cf. Acts 10)? Has he thought about the implications of the gospel for the salvation of the Gentiles, and then, in light of those implications, has he developed a careful strategy for mission? Peter has to almost be forced against his will to go to Cornelius. Three times God speaks to Peter in a vision, and three times Peter refuses to obey God's command, even lecturing God on the distinction between clean and common. (Peter, plainly, does not prefer pork to poetry!) And Peter's message, when he does finally go, begins with the words, "Now *I* understand." The first lesson was not for Cornelius but for Peter. The Lord leads Peter to the house of Cornelius so that Peter can hear and see *what the Lord* is doing there. Then, and only then, Peter can speak.

Paul, of course, is even more clearly an example of someone who has to have his eyes and ears opened before he can be a witness. Though Paul's Bible teacher was not as good as Peter's teacher, Gamaliel was regarded as one of the greatest teachers of his time. Paul had learned a lot of things, but he didn't know the one thing that he needed to know. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is filled with irony. Paul had *sent himself* to apprehend the followers of the Way. Along his way, he was himself *apprehended* by the Jesus he was persecuting, and then *sent by Jesus*, that is, made a true *apostle*, to proclaim the message of Jesus. Paul's excellent training in the Scriptures had not opened his eyes to their true meaning. He was certainly among those whom Jesus had said could not find life in the Scriptures because they could not find Jesus in the Scriptures. He had to be shown how blind he was before he could be made to see. In a way just as wonderful and mysterious as the way God had prepared Moses to lead his people, God used Saul's

entire life to prepare him for this revelation of his Son. How brilliantly clear God's marvelous plan of salvation must have suddenly appeared to Paul in all of its blinding glory! Paul experienced personally the truth of what had been spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?" (Rom 10:14).

The rest of the book of Acts does not tell the story of Paul the great missionary; it tells the story of the Lord Jesus using one of Israel's most rebellious sons to take the good news into all the world. Anyone who reads Acts carefully knows that Paul is certainly not in control. The Lord, through his Spirit, is guiding Paul every step of the way. Like Peter and like Paul, the reader is not able to know the times and the seasons that the Father has determined. But like Peter and Paul, the reader is invited to journey with the word as it travels out from Jerusalem and to behold the marvelous ways in which God will establish his kingdom of grace. If Peter and Paul were haunted by their pasts, they never mention it. They acknowledge their previous failures, but they go forward in the confidence and joy that Jesus's gracious answer gives to them: "You will be my witnesses."

"Singing Better Songs"

So, how can a bunch of melancholy myopics become faithful witnesses in suffering and in joy? How can we look more redeemed and sing better songs? How can we gain a hearing and have something to say worth hearing as we, together with the world, move through seasons of suffering and joy?

In suffering. Shortly after the presentation themes for this symposium were announced, I received an email from a pastor in Illinois. I hope he is here. He asked several very significant questions about the way we regard and live through suffering. I have not spent much time on the topic of suffering for two reasons: one old and one new.

As we began working together to plan these presentations, Chuck Arand made the same observation to me that he made to all of us yesterday. In our Lutheran circles, in pastoral training at the seminary and beyond, in our devotional literature and theological conversations, we seem to devote more time to finding joy in suffering than we do to finding joy in joy. That's neither as funny nor as puzzling as it first sounds. That this is not some sort of morbid Lutheran imbalance is shown by the following statement from George MacDonald—a statement with which I fully agree. Commenting on Matthew 5:4, "Blessed are those who mourn," MacDonald writes:

A man in sorrow is in general far nearer God than a man in joy. Gladness may make a man forget his thanksgiving; misery drives him to his prayers. For we are not yet, we are only becoming. The endless day will at length dawn whose every throbbing moment will heave our hearts Godward; we shall scarce need to lift them up: now, there are two doorkeepers to the house of prayer, and Sorrow is more on the alert to open than her grandson Joy.¹⁷

When suffering, too, can be experienced as the goodness of God at work, we will rejoice in suffering and sing praise, however feebly, to the God who saves.

The second and "new" reason is that two of yesterday's sectionals were devoted to this topic. I was not able to attend the sectional by Dr. Eyer but heard very good

reports concerning it, and my colleague Tim Saleska has already masterfully covered this material with special reference to the Psalms. If you were unable to hear these presentations yesterday, rejoice!, you still have another chance after lunch today.

In connection with that, there is one point that Tim made for us yesterday that I would like to repeat here, even expanding on it a little. In his section “Words Fail,” Tim shared a quote from Richard Rorty. That quote, with perhaps an extra sentence or two reads:

These distinctions help explain why ironist philosophy has not done, and will not do, much for freedom and equality. But they also explain why “literature” (in the older and narrower sense), as well as ethnography and journalism, is doing a lot. As I said earlier, pain is nonlinguistic: It is what we human beings have that ties us to the nonlanguage-using beasts. So victims of cruelty, people who are suffering, do not have much in the way of a language. That is why there is no such things as the “voice of the oppressed” or the “language of the victims.” The language the victims once used is not working anymore, and they are suffering too much to put new words together. So the job of putting their situation into language is going to have to be done for them by somebody else. The liberal novelist, poet, or journalist is good at that. The liberal theorist usually is not.¹⁸

We don’t need to be concerned here with Rorty’s understanding of ironist philosophy or to share his concern for liberalism to see the relevant point. Suffering people have no voice because words now fail them. “So the job of putting their situation into language is going to have to be done for them by somebody else.” And theorists, Rorty argues, are not very good at it. The suffering don’t need a theory, they need a story, a story that will draw them in and give them their words back and, ultimately, bring healing and peace. You are not theorists. You know the story that can restore sight and hearing and speech, the story that can bring birth to the dying, and healing, and peace, and salvation.

In joy. I will close with three final points, all aimed at assisting us in the task of being faithful witnesses in joy.

First, we must begin with a reconsideration of the joys we see God’s unbelieving children experience. And yes, they are his children even if they do not know it or know him. Are the world’s joys *all* wicked, deceitful, and vain? It is true that the root that gives us that Greek word γάω and our English word *joy* appears in Latin as *gaudium*. *Gaudium* is not only on the family tree of our word *joy*, it is also the root from which our English word *gaudy* derives. The line between true joy and gaudiness may be a fine one. But if the world cannot experience God’s goodness, how can they receive God’s good *news*? Perhaps the joys we see our unbelieving neighbor, unbelieving brother or sister or parent or child, experience can bring us together in celebration and thanksgiving rather than divide us further. Certainly their understanding of the source of the joy, of the Great Goodness behind it, will be partial or even lacking, but can we not at least allow that it is joy?

Second, and building on that, joy can, but need not always, lead us away from God. Perhaps Scriptures’ repeated admonitions and imperatives for us to rejoice are to be

a reminder to allow God's goodness to bring us even more completely into his embrace and to turn to him with thanksgiving. And here, without going into the details, let me simply note how striking the New Testament vocabulary for joy really is. I mentioned that the *γαίω* family of words does not occur in the New Testament, but I didn't tell you about the joyful family that is used in its place. The *χαίρω* family of words has to do with the idea of joy in the sense of delight, especially taking delight in something. Cousin to the family is the word for grace, suggesting that one helpful way of describing God's grace is his taking delight in us.¹⁹ Moreover, the word that is sometimes translated as *happy* and sometimes as *blessed*, stands in contrast to the modern English *happy* and the modern Greek equivalent,²⁰ both of which suggest the idea of luck or happenstance. The joy we experience in the goodness of God does not end when our luck runs out or when our circumstance changes for the worse. It is grounded in the blessing of God, his steadfast love, his taking delight in us through his Son, our Lord. And that is what the world does not know and needs to know so that their joy may be complete.

I was a little surprised, in fact, that Lin Yutang did not mention the other side of the traditional Chinese view of joy. With the rest of the world, the Chinese have also expressed their fear that joy today may mean sorrow tomorrow. The saying 樂極生悲 (great joy begets sorrow) dates back to the time before Christ in Chinese culture, and reflects the fears of all who look to luck or fate or self-determination or self-righteousness for their joy and happiness. Better to have a little joy than none at all, such reason warns. How far this is from the fullness of joy promised to us in Christ Jesus!

What our family, friends, and neighbors need is not someone who will cheapen or deprive them of their experiences of the goodness of our God. They need someone whose eyes have been trained to see the way God shows his hand, someone whose ears are attuned to his joyful humming. They need someone who can see and hear and then help them experience even more fully the joy that comes when the goodness of God strokes their faces or dries their tears, awakens their hearts to something they haven't felt in a long time: thankfulness.

Finally, perhaps in our witnessing it is time for us to also ask a few questions. Conversations about joy and suffering can very quickly be taken hostage by the question of "why bad things happen." As Chesterton once pointed out, the question people should be asking is, "Why should *anything* go right?"²¹ Why should fruit taste sweet? Why should a baby's antics make you smile? Why should people find joy in love? Why should we be able to reason or communicate at all? Though many may confess their unbelief in the God we know and love, few can live their day-to-day lives without taking for granted that beneath and behind it all there is something at work to make sure that some things go right.

I will leave you one final thought. I did not include it in my enumeration because it only indirectly helps us be more faithful witnesses and also because it's not mine. Any careful exploration of joy and suffering in the lives of humans in general and Christians in particular will sooner or later lead the explorer into areas of mystery that surpass our understanding. A good and faithful witness also knows when to keep silent.

Also from Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*:

Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian. And as I close this chaotic volume I open again the strange small book from which all Christianity came; and I am again haunted by a kind of confirmation. The tremendous figure which fills the Gospels towers in this respect, as in every other, above all the thinkers who ever thought themselves tall. His pathos was natural, almost casual. The Stoics, ancient and modern, were proud of concealing their tears. He never concealed His tears; He showed them plainly on His open face at any daily sight, such as the far sight of His native city. Yet He concealed something. Solemn supermen and imperial diplomatists are proud of restraining their anger. He never restrained His anger. He flung furniture down the front steps of the Temple, and asked men how they expected to escape the damnation of Hell. Yet He restrained something, I say it with reverence; there was in that shattering personality a thread that must be called shyness. There was something that He hid from all men when He went up a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth.²²

Endnotes

- ¹ Matthew C. Harrison, *A Little Book on Joy* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 2.
- ² Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spake Zarathustra," *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* trans. Thomas Common The Modern Library (New York: Random House, 1954), 98.
- ³ Lin Yutang, *The Importance of Living* (New York: John Day Company, 1937), 17.
- ⁴ Martin H. Franzmann, *Pray for Joy* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970).
- ⁵ Ibid., "To Find Joy in Life's Trials," 12–13.
- ⁶ Ibid., "In an Art Gallery," 35–36.
- ⁷ Ibid., "A Wedding Prayer," 76–77.
- ⁸ Ibid., 9.
- ⁹ Cf. Robert Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), "γάγνυμαι," 1.260–261.
- ¹⁰ *The Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary*, 1975 edition, "dog," 392.
- ¹¹ Lin, 124–125.
- ¹² Lin, 126.
- ¹³ Lin, 127.
- ¹⁴ Lin, 143.
- ¹⁵ Lin, 142.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Lin, 130–136. I have not quoted them in their original order.
- ¹⁷ MacDonald, "Sorrow the Pledge of Joy," *The Hope of the Gospel* (London: Ward, Lock, Bowden and Company, 1892), 98.
- ¹⁸ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 94.
- ¹⁹ Cf. Beekes, "γαίρω," II.1606–1607.
- ²⁰ (used only of persons).
- ²¹ G. K. Chesterton, "Orthodoxy," *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*; vol. 1 ed. David Dooley; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 236.
- ²² Ibid., 365–366.

Work

“Vocation” and the Sacred Secular

In the summer of 1977 I was more or less gainfully employed, putting up hay in Oklahoma. I worked for a man named Dude (his real name). Dude usually drove the baler, leaving long rows of eighty-pound bales stretched across the fields. My job was to follow, pick them up, and haul them to the hay barn. Dude did not believe in the virtues of excessive mechanization, so I used no fancy equipment to hoist or stack the bales: that was what I was supposed to do, and I was the foreman of a crew of one. Since I didn't have a truck of my own, Dude let me use his old, beat-up F-150. With a little practice, I could line up the pickup at one end of a row of bales, put it in the lowest gear and let it idle forward at a walking pace, while I hopped out and threw the bales up into the back. Occasionally, of course, I had to jump back behind the wheel and adjust the course, or even stop and get the bales stacked properly. Once I had a sufficient pile of bales on the pickup, I drove to the barn, backed in, and re-stacked the hay up to the rafters. This is called “bucking bales” and I doubt that it's legal anymore. Dude did not think I should be paid by the hour—I guess I was theoretically some kind of “independent contractor” or something—so I was paid by the amount of hay deposited in the barn. For bucking bales in the scorching heat, I got a dollar a ton. That was the worst job I ever had—so far.

We all work: labor in dizzying variety is part of daily human experience and necessity. Bucking bales for a dollar a ton must surely be regarded as a clear consequence of the fall, but labor and work were part of God's original design for human life even in the garden.

As Christians, and perhaps particularly as Lutherans, we have learned well how to think and speak about human work and its value. For starters, the Lutheran idea of human work is positive; ordinary human work is sanctified by God's command and promise. The Creator himself is at work through every day human beings in their normal occupations: farmers, builders, shoemakers, bakers, computer programmers, artists, parents, teachers, rulers, etc. Luther (and other reformers, too) discovered (or “recovered”) the positive value of ordinary human work. This positive value of ordinary human life, including work, lies at the heart of the Lutheran doctrine of vocation.

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“Vocation” is usually defined as duty and responsibility. The way we use the term is shaped by a Reformation insight about the value of common human tasks—specifically seeing those occupations of people in the world as God-pleasing and proper pursuits for Christians. The Reformation thus reclaims “secular” life as the sphere for genuine service to God (through the neighbor) and corrected a medieval exaltation of the religious life. Priests, monks, and nuns had been seen as engaged in higher, spiritually superior ways of life, practicing meritorious religious acts of devotion and sacrifice that were not ordinarily possible for the non-religious. The Reformation reordered the whole theological understanding of life through the gospel.

This value of the ordinary callings of life—even “secular” life, although the sacred/secular distinction doesn’t really apply in Lutheran terms—is partly a corollary of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith (cf. the essay by Charles Arand and Erik Herrmann). No special human religious works contribute to salvation. And so the Reformation recovery of “vocation” was partly a reaction against the medieval monastic ideal of the religious life.

At this point it may be helpful to take a slight detour to consider the idea of “religious vocation.” Roman Catholics, of course, use the word “vocation” in a narrower, more technical sense than Lutherans: it refers to the prayerful discernment and decision by individuals to dedicate themselves to a consecrated (religious) life as priests, monks, or nuns. While the Catholic Church does recognize certain forms of consecrated life as available to lay Christians, common usage reserves the term “vocation” for publicly professing and dedicating oneself in the form of specific religious vows.

In theory, Lutherans have abandoned the idea of a special religious life as one of special, higher spiritual status and value. In practice, though, we frequently hear people (clergy and laity alike) speak as if the public ministry of the word were very much such a special, divinely pleasing caste or estate, elevated above ordinary human life. In a curious twist of vocabulary, we Lutherans tend to reserve the Latinate term “vocation” as the word for *lay* responsibilities and duties, while we use the plain Anglo-Saxon “call” (and even, emphatically, “*divine* call”) as the distinct, technical designation for that which distinguishes the public ministry. A “call,” of course, is celebrated and sanctified with special reverence and ritual that are usually not attached to other (“mere”) vocations.

Why would Lutherans value the “divine call” into the Holy Ministry above merely “secular” vocations? Does this re-introduce and perpetuate an un-Lutheran notion of the religious life as spiritually higher and more valuable than common human forms of life and work? In theory, at least, it does not: the ministry is valued because through it God comes to us in his saving gospel in its preached, taught, and sacramental forms.

Those who are “called” (as distinct—illogically—from those who simply have a “vocation”) thus have the uniquely important task and privilege of busying themselves with our salvation. And here is a place where our thinking and language suffer if we

operate with too small a version of God's story. When our understanding of salvation is truncated and caricatured into an inadequate narrative of mere escape from the world, of "getting saved" and "going to heaven," then those who mediate such escape are supremely important and all other, merely earthly occupations have no real meaning. Remember Charles Arand's pithy summary of the truncated story: "I've sinned. I'm saved. I'm out of here." If that is our story, then the one who can get me "out of here" and into heaven is more important than all the ones engaged in worldly matters. I wonder how many pious Lutheran laypeople today harbor such a secret doubt about the meaning and value of their own work.

But enough about our ambiguity regarding specifically religious vocation. The value of ordinary human work—all so-called "secular" occupations and duties—was and is a pivotal insight of the Reformation. In this view "religious" life has no special status or privilege. In fact, man-made patterns of religious devotion and self-selected discipline are actually harmful because they are not based on the word of God and because they encourage people to rely on their own works and behavior as a basis for their status before God. Article XXVII of the Augsburg Confession discusses this problem at some length, with special reference to the vows which distinguished the religious life from ordinary Christian life in the world:

It was pretended that monastic vows would be equal to baptism, and that through monastic life one could earn forgiveness of sin and justification before God. Indeed, they added that one earns through monastic life not only righteousness and innocence, but also that through it one keeps the commands and counsels written in the gospel. In this way monastic vows were praised more highly than baptism. It was also said that one could earn more merit through the monastic life than through all other walks of life, which had been ordered by God, such as the office of pastor or preacher, the office of ruler, prince, lord, and the like. (These all serve in their vocations according to God's command, Word, and mandate without any contrived spiritual status.) [AC XXVII.11–13]

Not only are the tasks of preachers, rulers, and princes carried out by God's command, but all ordinary human work is seen as holy and sacred when we recognize that the Creator is at work through human instruments (or "masks"). Article XVI offers a good example of this transformed view:

Concerning public order and secular government it is taught that all political authority, orderly government, laws, and good order in the world are created and instituted by God and that Christians may without sin exercise political authority; be princes and judges; pass sentences and administer justice according to imperial and other existing laws; punish evildoers with the sword; wage just wars; serve as soldiers; buy and sell; take required oaths; possess property; be married; etc. Condemned here are the Anabaptists who teach that none of the things above is Christian. Also condemned are those

who teach that Christian perfection means physically leaving house and home, spouse and child, and refraining from the above-mentioned activities. In fact, the only true perfection is true fear of God and true faith in God. For the gospel teaches an internal, eternal reality and righteousness of the heart, not an external, temporal one. The gospel does not overthrow secular government, public order, and marriage but instead intends that a person keep all this as a true order of God and demonstrate in these walks of life true Christian love and true good works according to each person's calling. Christians, therefore, are obliged to be subject to political authority and to obey its commands and laws in all that may be done without sin. But if a command of the political authority cannot be followed without sin, one must obey God rather than any human beings.

Luther approaches the same idea of worldly work being the instruments of God's love and care and provision in the Large Catechism, where he explains the First Article of the Apostles Creed to mean that the Creator's work is done through all kinds of ordinary human work (farmers, rulers, etc.) as well as through other (non-human) creatures (sun, moon, seasons, weather, etc.). To make a long story short, a proper confessional Lutheran view is that "secular" work is itself sacred because God commands it, blesses it, and uses it. We begin thinking well about work when we remember that sacredness; we forget it at our peril.

Some Lutherans take some pains to point out that, strictly speaking, non-Christians do not have vocations, though they can and do serve God's good purposes in the world unwittingly, in spite of themselves. This is perhaps a little like the fine distinction Erik Herrmann introduces between "grace" and "goodness"—and like that distinction, we probably should keep in mind that it is more useful as an internal tool in our theological system than as a means of communicating clearly with the rest of the world. While a distinction between "vocation" (the Christian thing) and "estate" (what other people have) may be true, at the moment I am not really interested in my subjective recognition that God has called me to be a husband to my wife, a father to my children, a teacher to my students, etc. Rather, I want to make the point that the Reformation doctrine of justification resulted in a new appreciation of "worldly" life per se as the arena of the Creator's generosity and care, and thus also the proper sphere of living out genuine faith and love. Christians should indeed be taught and reminded that they please God and serve the people around them in the ordinary tasks of daily life. But it is true whether they remember it or not.

Max Weber Had a Point

The historical and cultural developments since the Reformation have been profoundly shaped by this Protestant idea of the sacredness of secular work. Our contemporary society and our economic system bear the marks of the Reformation insight.

A century ago sociologist Max Weber argued that the Protestant "ethos" placed supreme moral value on work and vocation as the proper expression of service to God,

so that what he called a “Calvinistic worldly asceticism” displaced the other-worldliness of the dedicated religious life. To be fair, Weber was especially interested in the Puritan Calvinists, and one of his favorite examples was that famous “theologian” Benjamin Franklin, so he was clearly not talking about a deeply orthodox and theologically informed kind of Protestantism! His concern, after all, is the way Protestantism (and especially Calvinism and Puritanism) shape capitalist societies.

Briefly put, Weber argued that, while medieval monasticism led men and women away from worldly pursuits and the business of everyday life and commerce, the habits and morals of this worldly asceticism directed pious Protestants to intensified diligence and hard-working success in their worldly callings. “The only way of living acceptably to God,” according to Weber, “was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfillment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling.” This line of Calvinist-Puritan thought in turn shapes ideas about work, wealth, and religious duty. Describing the teaching of seventeenth-century English Puritan Richard Baxter, Weber said:

Wealth as such is a great danger; its temptations never end, and its pursuit is not only senseless . . . but it is morally suspect. . . . [But] the real moral objection is to relaxation in the security of possession, the enjoyment of wealth with the consequence of idleness and the temptations of the flesh, above all the distraction from the pursuit of a religious life. . . . For the saints’ everlasting rest is in the next world; on earth man must, to be certain of his state of grace, “do the works of him who sent him, as long as it is yet day.” Not leisure and enjoyment, but only activity serves to increase the glory of God. . . . Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. . . . Thus inactive contemplation is also valueless, or even directly reprehensible if is at the expense of one’s daily work. For it is less pleasing to God than the active performance of His will in a calling. . . . Unwillingness to work is symptomatic of the lack of grace.¹

I think Weber misunderstands Luther when he describes the reformer’s doctrine of vocation as merely a kind of resignation to divinely imposed limits and conditions. For example, he says that Luther conceived of vocation as “a fate to which he must submit and which he must make the best of.” Weber overlooks the positive view of all kinds of work in which Luther discerns the Creator’s providential hand.

Nevertheless, Weber had a point: the Puritan insistence on hard work and prosperity as signs of God’s grace have deeply shaped our culture, our politics, and our economy. The ethical principles attached to hard work are still very much at work in America today, though admittedly often in a less overtly religious form. We Americans highly value work, we respect those identified as hard workers, and we derive much (perhaps too much) of our identity and self-esteem from success in our careers. Unemployment is a psychological and even existential problem, as much as it is a financial one.

What Are People For?

The narrow Puritan focus on a “well-marked calling” redefined the Protestant idea of “vocation” in specifically economic terms, as gainful employment of one kind or another. As Weber understood this development, such work not only serves to increase the common good, but is seen as the most important way in which a Christian glorifies God and proves himself to be a true Christian.

One consequence of this (as Weber also points out) was Protestant hostility toward anything in life without a specific religious purpose. The worldly asceticism of the Puritans objected to getting too much sleep; allowed for sex within marriage so long as it was an expression of obedience to God’s command to be fruitful; frowned on sports; and warned against hanging around public houses. “Impulsive enjoyment of life, which leads away both from work in a calling and from religion, was as such the enemy of rational asceticism.” Weber connected this ascetic impulse to the economic success of Protestant culture:

This worldly Protestant asceticism . . . acted powerfully against the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions; it restricted consumption, especially of luxuries. . . .When the limitation of consumption is combined with this release of acquisitive activity, the inevitably practical result is obvious: accumulation of capital through ascetic compulsion to save.²

The logic of Weber’s analysis seems to drive inescapably from the Protestant Reformation to a view of the human creature as *homo economicus*, man as merely (or at least primarily) an economic unit whose value is properly measured in terms of production or consumption, or both. That logic has largely worked its way through our culture, shaping the way Americans (whether Christians or not) think of work.

Our government, it turns out, is very interested in us both as “workers” (units of production) and as “consumers” and considers our vigorous activity in both roles to be a kind of patriotic duty. The Bureau of Labor Statistics uses its \$600 million annual budget to track the total size of the country’s “labor force” and keep a very attentive finger on the pulse of the US “job market.” That labor force, of course, does not include nearly *all* of us: it is the portion of the population of adult age who are considered eligible to be “workers.” If you’re too young, too old, too sick, or just tired of looking for work and no longer eligible for government “unemployment benefits” (which is frankly a strange phrase), then you do not get counted as part of the labor force. The “unemployment rate” is the portion of that labor force that is currently not employed. Strange things happen with these numbers. As a proportion of the total population, the labor force (the part of the population who could be counted as workers) seems to be shrinking of late; it is unclear whether some kind of long-term economic cycle is at work here. Yet the unemployment rate is also going down (slowly) after a nasty spike in 2009. In other words, more and more of our fellow citizens are not working, but their *lack* of work does not “count” according to the government’s standards.

My point in touching on this kind of statistic (which we hear mentioned almost every day in the news) is that the governmental, statistical way of accounting for “work” has become deeply engrained in us. Our understanding of “vocation” is usually reduced

to work, and it is an easy slip of the mind from “work” to “gainful employment.” We Christians also tend to do this even though, if we are pressed, we know that vocation is more than what we do for money, and includes all the duties and responsibilities that are ours as part of the Creator’s pattern of providing for human life and caring for the world. We know the rich story of the Creator’s care and we can appreciate the depth of the idea of “vocation,” but we may frequently just accept the bureaucratic designation and consider ourselves “workers.”

Other agencies track other measurable statistics that view us as “consumers” rather than workers. Our friends at the Bureau of Labor Statistics collect mountains of data to calculate the “consumer price index” every month. (It was down by 0.2 percent in August [2014]—hope you enjoyed that.) And the non-governmental Conference Board keeps track of something called “consumer confidence.” (It’s up slightly; thanks for asking.) The duty of us all, when the country is faced with an economic crisis, is to *consume* as much as possible, and more. Buy, borrow, spend, and go shopping: it is your duty as a consumer-citizen. The Cars Allowance Rebate System (a.k.a. the “cash for clunkers” program) was not only about getting older, less efficient cars off the road, but was also intended as a stimulus for consumers to “trade up,” get rid of their older (but perhaps *paid for*) models, and buy something—anything!—new.

Gradually but discernably, our identity has become defined by our function and utility in the economy as *workers* and *consumers*—and the latter is more important than the former, since our economy, we are told, is “consumer-driven.” As far as I understand that notion, it means that whether you produce or do anything worthwhile or not, for goodness’s sake don’t stop *buying* stuff! In terms of this kind of economics, being a worker is important mainly because getting paid means you can buy more things.

Any economy or economic theory is rooted in an idea of what people are *for*, a conception of how we value human activity. Viewing people as only workers and consumers is a serious reduction and limitation of our view of human life and dignity. And it has serious repercussions, about which we will say more below. But now we must turn our thoughts to “rest.”

Rest

We do not work all the time. Even for the most pious Puritan or the most addicted workaholic, rest is also a common human need and experience, and an experience about which the Christian story has something to offer.

Sabbath and the Spiritualization of Rest

The Old Testament, of course, commands the observance of the Sabbath as a day of rest, distinct from the rest of the week and set aside to remember and enjoy the Creator. Especially in the Reformed tradition, a more or less literal application of this commandment shaped the practice and expectations in society, even in civil law.³

Luther’s take on the Sabbath commandment, of course, was significantly different and did not insist on such civil consequences. In the Large Catechism he explained the Third Commandment in this way:

As far as outward observance is concerned, the commandment was given to the Jews alone. They were to refrain from hard work and to rest, so that both human beings and animals might be refreshed and not be exhausted by constant labor. . . . Therefore, according to its outward meaning, this commandment does not concern us Christians. It is an entirely external matter, like other regulations of the Old Testament associated with particular customs, persons, times, and places, from all of which we are now set free through Christ. But to give a Christian interpretation to the simple people of what God requires of us in this commandment, note that we do not observe holy days for the sake of intelligent and well-informed Christians, for they have no need of them. We observe them, first, because our bodies need them. Nature teaches and demands that the common people—menservants and maidservants who have gone about their work and trade all week long—should also retire for a day to rest and be refreshed. Second, and most important, we observe them so that people will have time and opportunity on such days of rest, which otherwise would not be available, to attend worship services, that is, so that they may assemble to hear and discuss God’s Word and then to offer praise, song, and prayer to God.

For his sixteenth-century German audience, Luther explained that the civil prohibition of work on one particular day was now abrogated and the literal meaning of the commandment no longer applied to Christians. Rather, Luther taught that the spiritual meaning still instructed God’s people to pay close attention to the word of God. The New Testament Sabbath, according to this explanation, is about setting aside time to hear and learn God’s word, not about the work or business a person may or may not conduct on a given day.

In this way, not only the specific commandment of the Sabbath but also the more general concept of “rest” was spiritualized. At the same time, physical rest was *instrumentalized* and valued only insofar as it served to promote and enable our *real* service to God in our work and vocation. In other words, literal, physical rest was not necessarily good in itself—and the Christian’s real rest would be in the hereafter—but it was permissible as long as it served to make us more fit for work.

Rest as Health

Puritans saw bodily rest as a concession to human weakness and involving its own temptations to idleness and luxury; rest was acceptable when needed, but not to be overindulged. The contemporary world tends to view rest as an ingredient in physical and psychological health and wellness, rather than a matter of moral character or spiritual discipline. In other words, rest in our culture has become primarily a matter of self-concern, instrumentalized again but this time in service to a worldly end rather than ultimate spiritual salvation.

There are enough reasons in this world to make rest a necessity, for in this bent and broken world we (and I mean, we *people*, all of us) are often enough weary with

toil and sorrow. And I wholeheartedly agree with Luther about the need for individuals and communities to set aside regular time to hear and discuss God's word and give him praise. Yet it is a mistake to reduce rest to a necessary instrument in support of our work, or to a spiritual discipline in pursuit of our salvation. Laughter, and perhaps even a degree of folly, lie at the heart of rest, and the sheer goodness of these things is self-evident, whether we can fit them neatly into our dogmatics or not: the amiable companionship of simply being with people we love, the exquisite pleasure of a joke well told, the indulgent inertia of sleeping late, the little delight of a cigar with a perfect draw. We must not make it too serious a matter, this rest of ours, because earnestness desecrates pleasure. When we speak of rest as "health" we mean that the well-being and flourishing of human creatures includes and embraces such quietness, levity, laughter, affection, and even plain idleness as part of our sanity and wholeness.

Leisure as Consumption

Enough about rest. Someone, somehow, discovered that there is little money to be made from my enjoyment of rest for its own sake. Because human beings have been reduced to more or less to economic units, *leisure* in the contemporary world (and in the American economy) has been classified on the consumption side of the ledger. When we are not "producing" (that is, at work), we are supposed to be "consuming" through a bewildering variety of entertainments, sports, recreations, diversions, and pastimes. Wendell Berry calls these the "pleasure industries," to which we turn for some diversion, or consolation, when we are alienated and defeated by our work.

The industrialization of leisure is everywhere around us, and we are besieged and numbed by myriad forms of entertainment. Television, games, idle gossip, the whole Pandora's box of the World Wide Web—and that is just on the phones in our pockets. In our society and economy, huge amounts of wealth change hands in the relentless, energetic pursuit of leisure: theme parks, jet-skis, casinos, professional sports, and on and on. No government office or think tank keeps statistics on this, as far as I am aware, but I suspect that most Americans spend more time and money on—and more to the point, direct their *hearts* toward—the consumption of what is offered by the industries of leisure and entertainment, than we enjoy the simpler (and cheaper) pleasures of rest.

It is a sly deception to substitute the consumption of leisure for the plain health and sanity of rest, but that does not stop me from participating as a leisure consumer. Let me just point to one readily recognizable and nearly ubiquitous example of the industrialization of leisure: electronics. From big-screen TV's, to blue-ray players, to cable and TiVo and HD sports, to X-Box/Playstation/Minecraft/Warcraft/Halo, to Angry Birds and Farmville, to Facebook/Twitter/Instagram, to BuzzFeed, to Netflix . . . Well, perhaps you get the idea. Because our various electronic gadgets are designed both to plug us incessantly into "work" and also to put all kinds of industrialized leisure at our fingertips, they have become the insidious enemies of real rest. This is not just my rant: there have been medical studies that measure the ways in which our use of electronics interferes with sleep patterns and increases stress.

Play

Human beings are not mere economic units, and cannot be reduced to some combination of production and consumption. Similarly, not everything in life is easily labeled as “work” or “rest.” There is, in fact, a whole spectrum of human activity that lies between the labor of our livelihood (work) and passive relaxation (rest), and yet cannot properly be categorized as leisure consumption, either.

Why Do We Play?

The Puritans, according to Max Weber at least, waged a relentless campaign against “the impulsive enjoyment of life” and of possessions. In that sense, of course, Puritanism seems to have decisively lost the culture war: it is hard to imagine a society more dedicated to the “impulsive enjoyment of life” than our own. The industrialized hedonism of contemporary America is a far cry from Weber’s Protestant ethic, but the spirit of capitalism is alive and well in our quickness to monetize our pleasures. Yet persistently and quietly, we humans keep inventing ways to reconnect work and pleasure. I will use “play” as a term that describes those efforts.

Love’s Labors Lost?

What I have in mind by the term “play” is not consumption of pleasures to compensate for our dehumanizing work. Perhaps such consumption can, to an extent, help us do our duty as consumers, but it does not satisfy—it is not intended to satisfy!—and leads us in a cycle of escalating, unfulfilled desires. In fundamental ways, we are pressed to divide our life between work and leisure, and that division introduces a deep rift between labor and love. What’s lost in our bifurcated world is too often the real, lived connection between work and enjoyment. According to the common myth of our culture, you are not supposed to enjoy your job: if it were fun they would not have to pay you to do it.

This rift between labor and love is partly the result of how our work, our gainful employment, our job is physically distant from our home. The places Americans work are largely devoid of simple enjoyment, and at the same time our homes are not sufficiently places of the meaningful, pleasant work that flows from love. One toxic consequence of the segregation of work and love, vocation and family, is that the family is also reduced to a unit of consumption.

“Play” is work we do for the sheer pleasure of it. It is not intended to be confused with idleness or mere pastimes or entertainment. Hobbies, avocations, and amateur pursuits often demand intense labor, practiced skill, and long hours or even years of accumulated knowledge. Play, in this sense, is the pursuit of something of intrinsic value for its own sake, without regard for other (extrinsic) rewards. Other words for this kind of self-selected activity are “avocation” or “hobby” or “amateur interest” or “creative expression.”

A couple of simple examples may illustrate this combination of labor and love, of work pursued for its own sake. If a carpenter is someone who earns his living from making things with wood, then I am not a carpenter. But like many people I have

occasionally made things for pleasure, and because I needed them: bookshelves, mostly. When my son was about two years old, I made a little chair for him, scaled to his size, and built without any power tools (because I had none). I remember with pleasure the time and care I took to design, to build, and to finish that chair (which I still have). Recently I noticed that little plastic chairs about that size can be bought for a few dollars in Walmart, but a purely monetary comparison between my little wooden chair and these mass-produced plastic ones seems completely meaningless. It is equally nonsensical to compute in terms merely of dollars and cents the benefits of my home-grown tomatoes, yet any home gardener will understand the self-evident pleasure that is linked with the labor of digging, tending, weeding, watering, and harvesting.

In much of human experience today, our work is not where we expect to find pleasure, and our home is perhaps idealized as only a place of leisure (and especially promoted as a place to consume the products of the leisure industry). Why is there such a distance between our work and our affection, asks Wendell Berry—to which we might also add the divide between work and pleasure, and family, and love?

More and more, we take for granted that work must be destitute of pleasure. More and more, we assume that if we want to be pleased we must wait until evening, or the weekend, or vacation, or retirement. More and more, our farms and forests resemble factories and offices, which in turn more and more resemble prisons—why else should we be so eager to escape them? . . . In the right sort of economy, our pleasure would not be merely an addition or by-product or reward; it would be both an empowerment of our work and its indispensable measure. . . . In order to have leisure and pleasure, we have mechanized and automated and computerized our work. But what does this do but divide us even more from our work and our products—and, in the process, from one another and the world?⁴

Berry goes on: “We are defeated at work because our work gives us no pleasure. We are defeated at home because we have no pleasant work there. We turn to the pleasure industries for relief from our defeat, and are again defeated, for the pleasure industries can thrive and grow only upon our dissatisfaction with them.” In other words, the meaning (and purpose and respect and status) of work is too often alien to our home and family. And the love and pleasure of home is too often far from our work and livelihood.

The famous amenities at Google’s corporate headquarters strike me as the exception that proves this rule. According to Wikipedia, “Facilities include free laundry rooms (Buildings 40, 42, and CL3), two small swimming pools, multiple sand volleyball courts, and eighteen cafeterias with diverse menus. Google has also installed replicas of SpaceShipOne and a dinosaur skeleton.”⁵ Personally I wish I had one of their sleep pods for those much-needed afternoon naps.

The reason we smile at such descriptions is that the common experience of work is usually so different, and largely divorced from pleasure. Pastors, it should be noted, by and large have a number of privileges in this regard. We mostly have the pleasure of at least not working in a cubicle, and of not having our work measured strictly accord-

ing to some quantity of time or output. It is much less common now, but it was not so long ago that many pastors lived in a parsonage within easy walking distance of the church they served. In this way they were much like their people: farmers who lived on the land they worked, or shopkeepers who lived above their stores. Be that as it may, we must remember that the physical distance (and also the conceptual segregation) between leisure/pleasure/affection and work is much greater now for almost all people in our country, including pastors. So great and pervasive has this separation become that most of us simply take the physical distance and the compartmentalization for granted. But we should ponder: what does this mean?

Play, in the sense I use the term here, seeks to recover the pleasure, delight, and love involved in work as we do a thing for its own sake, because the thing itself is worth doing and thus worth doing well. In doing so we may buy tools and use materials, and we will take delight and pleasure in the work; but what I am suggesting (and what all of us long to experience) is not the same as consuming products from the pleasure industries. We take pleasure from the willing, loving work freely chosen by human beings, as freely as their Creator made the universe.

I do not seem to be able to get through a whole essay on any topic without quoting G. K. Chesterton. And on this point, too, he is instructive, both as to the dignity and sacredness of human work and as to its limits and scale.

God is that which can make something out of nothing. Man (it may truly be said) is that which can make something out of anything. In other words, while the joy of God be unlimited creation, the special joy of man is limited creation, the combination of creation with limits. Man's pleasure, therefore, is to possess conditions, but also to be partly possessed by them; to be half-controlled by the flute he plays or the field he digs. The excitement is to get the utmost out of given conditions; the conditions will stretch, but not indefinitely. A man can write an immortal sonnet on an old envelope, or hack a hero out of a lump of rock. But hacking a sonnet out of a rock would be a laborious business, and making a hero out of an envelope is almost out of the sphere of practical politics. This fruitful strife with limitations, when it concerns some airy entertainment of an educated class, goes by the name of Art. . . . Every man should have something that he can shape in his own image; as he is shaped in the image of heaven. Because he is not God, but only a graven image of God, his self-expression must deal with limits; properly with limits that are strict and even small.⁶

As God the Creator delights and takes pleasure in the things he has made, we have begun—like children at play imitating their parents' work—to take pleasure in creation, too, and to find delight as we work in it, and with it, and for it.

Conclusion: Workers, Consumers, and Other Humans

In common with all human beings, Christians work, and rest, and play. And at the same time, Christians have been let in on the *secret* that this rich, varied pattern of

human life is embraced in God's story of creation, redemption, resurrection, restoration, and re-creation.

Sometimes, of course, our actual experience of work is very far from what God intended. What made bucking bales for a dollar a ton "bad work"? If I am honest, I will admit that it was not the hard labor, the heat and sweat, or the lousy pay. I have, in the years since that summer, worked harder, and sweat more, for even less money—and I enjoyed it. What made that summer job bad was my complete lack of any connection to the work itself. It was not my field, it was not my hay, it was not even my truck. I was just a worker, and not a very good one, at that; my involvement in the work ended as soon as I got paid.

I think all people, Christians and non-Christians alike, seek a connection to the work they do. That connection comes, in the end, from affection, from love, from the sense that the thing is itself worth doing and therefore worth doing well. But the connection of work and pleasure is lost when we misunderstand what work is. The story of God at work in the world prompts us to restore that connection, because God himself delights in what he has made.

Dorothy Sayers, writing in the early years of World War II, argued that the whole future of civilization depended on carrying out what she called a "revolution in our ideas about work." I think she was right, but I fear the revolution is going badly so far. Sayers proposed that a proper Christian attitude toward work was absolutely vital, and at the same time quite revolutionary, because it would turn our whole economic system upside down.

The habit of thinking about work as something one does to make money is so ingrained in us that we can scarcely imagine what a revolutionary change it would be to think about it instead in terms of the work done. To do so would mean taking the attitude of mind we reserve for unpaid work—our hobbies, our leisure interests, the things we make and do for pleasure—and making *that* the standard of all our judgments about things and people. We should ask of an enterprise, not "will it pay?" but "is it good?"; of a man, not "what does he make?" but "what is his work worth?"; of goods, not "can we induce people to buy them?" but "are they useful things well made?"; of employment, not "how much a week?" but "will it exercise my faculties to the utmost?" And shareholders in—let us say—brewing companies, would astonish the directorate by arising at the shareholders' meetings and demanding to know, not merely, where the profits go or what dividends are to be paid, not even merely whether the workers' wages are sufficient and the conditions of labor satisfactory, but loudly, and with a proper sense of personal responsibility: "What goes into the beer?"⁷

Work, Sayers contended, "should, in fact, be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of the work itself; and that man, made in God's image, should make things, as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing." The alternative, which seems to be what our civilization has been busily build-

ing for decades, is a doomed and self-defeating economy of waste: “A society in which consumption has to be artificially stimulated in order to keep production going is a society founded on trash and waste, and such a society is a house built upon sand.”⁸

Faithful Christian witness in work starts with the value of the work itself, in its own right, not as a means to some other end or a pretense for some specifically “religious” agenda. Here is Sayers again: “It is the business of the Church to recognize that the secular vocation, as such, is sacred.” Sayers, of course, was unencumbered by our particular Lutheran usage of the vocabulary of *vocation* and *call*, but she helpfully subverts our cultural assumptions when she says, “Christian people, and particularly perhaps Christian clergy, must get it firmly into their heads that when a man or woman is called to do a particular job of secular work, that is as true a vocation as though he or she were called to specifically religious work.” Sayers grasps that the church has become as confused about work as the world around us.

In nothing has the Church so lost Her hold on reality as in her failure to understand and respect the secular vocation. She has allowed work and religion to become separate departments, and is astonished to find that, as a result, the secular work of the world is turned to purely selfish and destructive ends, and that the greater part of the world’s intelligent workers have become irreligious, or at least, uninterested in religion. But is it astonishing? How can one remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of his life? The Church’s approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church *should* be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables. Church by all means, and decent forms of amusement, certainly—but what use is all that if in the very center of his life and occupation he is insulting God with bad carpentry?⁹

Bad carpentry—or bad work of any kind—takes on a moral dimension in Sayers’s view, because she puts work at the heart of human life and meaning. The work we do matters, because our work participates in the Creator’s own work in the world. Sayers herself was an Anglican, and in some ways her ideas of ideas about economics and politics paralleled the Distributism of Roman Catholics such as G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. But her view of work captures with vivid power the Lutheran doctrine of vocation and its connection to the doctrine of creation. Faithlessness or negligence in our work entails, at its heart, a failure in our relationship to God. Such a failure pervades too much work, and the church is not only susceptible to it but may actually indulge it with pious excuses, as Sayers saw clearly:

Yet in Her own buildings, in Her own ecclesiastical art and music, in Her hymns and prayers, in Her sermons and in Her little books of devotion, the Church will tolerate or permit a pious intention to excuse work so ugly, so

pretentious, so tawdry and twaddling, so insincere and insipid, so *bad* as to shock and horrify any decent draftsman. And why? Simply because She has lost all sense of the fact that the living and eternal truth is expressed in work only so far as that work is true in itself, to itself, to the standards of its own technique. She has forgotten that the secular vocation is sacred.¹⁰

Faithful witness values work, and also celebrates true rest, because it understands and embraces human life in creation. Such witness is deeply biblical, but in no sense sectarian or exclusively religious. Indeed, while it confronts a dehumanized economy that has taken hold in our time, it aligns us with a wide variety of people who also desire genuine human flourishing and oppose what threatens that. This puts Christians in precisely that relationship to the world around them that Erik Herrmann calls “reciprocity of witness” as we stand not over against but alongside other people. Together we try to re-integrate (but not exactly combine) our work and rest, our labor and our love, as creatures together with all other creatures. This vision of human life and flourishing would, if it caught on widely, subvert and revolutionize the entire American economy, and perhaps end the spirit of capitalism as we have come to know it. And yet this subversive vision of human work and rest is compelling because, while it does not demand or insist on the Christian account of the world, it is definitely enriched and deepened by God’s story, our story.

In this essay I have tried to suggest ways of thinking about human work, rest, and play that are faithful to our own theological tradition, and at the same time open to listening to and learning from the common experience of our fellow human creatures. We are left, not with neat answers, but with questions ringing in our ears, questions captured by Wendell Berry thus: “Where is our comfort but in the free, uninvolved, finally mysterious beauty and grace of this world that we did not make, that has no price? Where is our sanity but there? Where is our pleasure but in working and resting kindly in the presence of this world?”¹¹

Endnotes

¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 103–105.

² *Ibid.*, 115–116.

³ Blue laws, or Sunday laws, which ban work or commerce on Sundays, were enacted in the United States as moral reform measures in the nineteenth century. Although primarily rooted in Calvinist or Arminian theology, they were frequently supported also by Lutherans—though notably not by the Missouri Synod. I remember when I was a teenager, seeing television commercials for a Jewish-owned furniture store in South Carolina, which always ended with the words, “Closed Saturdays for Sabbath observance; closed Sundays due to unjust blue laws.”

⁴ Wendell Berry, “Economy and Pleasure,” in *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point, 1990), 139–140.

⁵ “Googleplex,” *Wikipedia*, September 20, 2014, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Googleplex>.

⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World* (New York: Cosimo, 2007; originally published 1910), 34.

⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1995), 70–71.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 76–77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹¹ Wendell Berry, “Economy and Pleasure,” 140.

HOMILETICAL HELPS

Easter 6 • 1 John 5:1–8 • May 10, 2015

John's logic here regarding the relationship between *faith*, *love*, and *testimony* is straightforward: (1) God-born *faith* in Jesus as the Christ and the divine Son (2) is to be exhibited as Christ-like *love* toward God and neighbor (3), and such faith rests upon and is renewed by the truthful, consistent *testimony* of the gospel. That is to say, this firmly-attested *testimony* so strengthens our *faith* in the joyous news of Jesus's coming and sacrifice for us that we gladly live out his commandment to *love* both God and man.

These are not just nice ideas. Jesus came in the *flesh* (1 Jn 1:1–2; 4:2; Jn 1:14). His *blood* cleanses us from sin (1 Jn 1:7). Guided by the Spirit, the apostles were eye-witnesses to Jesus's coming (1 Jn 1:3; cf. Acts 10:36–42), including the “blood and water” which flowed from his corpse at Calvary (Jn 19:34–35). This consistent, unified, truthful, Spirit-born witness continues today in the real-life preaching of this apostolic gospel and in the water and blood of Christ's sacraments. The single message is this: Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, died, and risen again in love for the world, to atone for the sins of the whole world, and to give us eternal life! Such massive love raises us to a new life of love for God and for our neighbor, as God wills and commands.

Truthful testimony, certain faith, and active love could provide the three parts of a sermon on this text, beginning with vv. 6–8 (testimony), and working backward to vv. 4–5 (faith in Jesus) and vv. 1–3 (love). This gospel sequence could be prefaced by calling hearers to acknowledge and repent of their own lack of love. In this, the story of James and John from Luke 9:52–56 might provide a helpful beginning. How different John and his brother once were from the gospel goals expressed in this text—and, often, how different are we! Alternatively, the example of Jesus's own love could be lifted up as God's intention for humanity, focusing either on the culminating self-sacrifice of his passion (Jn 15:12–13) or the summation of his earthly life in Acts 10:38, which proclaims that Jesus went about “doing good” (εὐεργετῶν, “good-working”). How short we fall! Yet consider again how God has attested to us the person, work, and love of Jesus. Rejoice once again in this Savior. Hear once again the call of the Spirit in the apostolic gospel, in your baptism, and in the Lord's Supper—the call to the new life of love!

Love. The theme of Christian love was introduced in v. 1, and vv. 2–3 tie this love closely to God's commandments. Yes, such love is spontaneous, mirroring the Father's own love for us (1 Jn 3:1–2; 4:9–12, 16, 19) and, especially, the ultimate love shown by Jesus's self-sacrifice for us on the cross (1 Jn 3:16). Nevertheless, such love is still commanded by God (1 Jn 3:23; 4:19–21). This love for God and for our brother is no new commandment; it is the command given from the beginning and expounded in the OT commandments of God (2 Jn 5–6; Mt 22:36–40). At the same time, the bright light of divine love is now shining in the world in a new way, in a new age, since the coming-in-flesh and self-sacrifice of Jesus, so that God's command for Christians to love is also new (1 Jn 2:7–8; cf. Jn 13:34 and the Gospel reading for this Sunday, Jn 15:9–17). Verse 3

closes with the assurance that such commandments are not βαρύς (ESV: “burdensome”), which contrasts with Matthew 23:4, where the scribes and Pharisees wield the law in order to “tie up heavy (βαρύς) burdens and put them on men’s shoulders.”

Faith. The opening ὅτι-clause (“For . . .”) explains why God’s commandments to love are not burdensome: their fulfillment flows from faith, and this faith (a) is born of God, (b) overcomes the hatred and hating ways of the world (cf. Rom 12:20–21), and (c) is founded squarely on Jesus Christ himself, the Son of God. These verses repeat the notion of victory and overcoming, three times using the verb νικάω and the noun νίκη (cf. the athletic brand). Νικάω is used frequently by John in the NT (for example, Jn 16:33; 1 Jn 2:13–14; 4:4; Rv 2:7; 3:21; 12:11; 21:7). Earlier in his epistle (1 Jn 3:23), John has paired God’s command to *love* with his command to *believe* in the name of his Son Jesus Christ; indeed, faith in Christ comes first and is the font and foundation of Christian love.

Testimony. These verses accent the reliability and the physicality of the testimony regarding Jesus as the come-in-flesh Christ. The reference to the testimony of the Spirit refers primarily to the public preaching of the apostles, the authorized eyewitnesses to Jesus, and to the preaching of those in fellowship with them and in concurrence with their testimony of Christ (see 1 Jn 1:1–4, and especially 4:1–6). The apostolic preaching about Jesus is no mere human message, but rather the testimony of God himself concerning his Son and the eternal life found in him (1 Jn 4:6; 5:9–12; Acts 10:39–42). And God is true and truthful (1 Jn 5:20). Also, the Spirit-directed apostolic testimony is self-consciously founded upon the Spirit’s previous testimony to Christ in the prophetic Scriptures of the OT (Acts 10:43), which Jesus declares to be the Father’s witness regarding his Son (Jn 5:37–40).

The pairing “water and blood” is repeated three times in these verses. The verbal and thematic echo of John 19:34–35 in this pericope is unmistakable: “But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe.” Yet the emphasis here in 1 John 5 is not only on the testimony *about* the blood and water of Jesus’s pierced side, but also on the testimony *given by* “the water and the blood.” Writing to early Christian congregations, John’s language evokes the testifying roles of the sacraments: baptismal *water* and the new *testament* in Christ’s *blood* in the Eucharist. The testimony of “the water and the blood” is mentioned “so that we might think not only of the tokens of our redemption *then* but also of God’s appointed means for delivering that same redemption to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness *now*.”¹ Set alongside the Spirit-guided, apostolic preaching of Christ, there are thus “three” witnesses. Yet, these three witnesses εἰς τὸ ἓν εἰσιν (literally, “are into one/oneness”; ESV: “agree”). These three witnesses bear a consistent, unified testimony. Many Lutheran hymns rejoice in this rich testimony, most notably the hymn “Water, Blood, and Spirit Crying” (LSB 597).

The KJV and NKJV include a textual variant, an extra clause (sometimes called the Johannine Comma) inserted in vv. 7–8 which applies the “three-in-one” dynamic of this passage to the heavenly Trinity of Father, Word, and Holy Spirit, as well as to

the Spirit, water, and blood witnessing on earth. While this addition would be the fullest expression of Trinitarian doctrine in the Bible, it does not appear in any Greek NT manuscripts before the Middle Ages,² is not essential to the flow of John's thought in this passage, and should be set aside in preaching on this text (as the ESV does).

Thomas Egger

Endnotes

¹ Bruce Schuchard, *1–3 John Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 537, author's emphasis.

² *Ibid.*, 512.

Easter 7 • 1 John 5:9–15 • May 17, 2015

Testifying in the Courtroom

Life is one of the apostle's favorite images of salvation, and he makes use of it in the assigned text: "And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son" (1 Jn 5:11). John speaks of eternal life in a forensic context, taking us to a courtroom where God the Father bears witness or testifies to the life he gives us in his Son. In this courtroom drama, God testifies to the reality of life in his Son, against the world, and for our consolation.

In true Johannine fashion, the apostle offers us a contrast between two opposing principles at war with each other, namely, the way of the Son that leads to life and the way of the world that leads to death: "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (v. 12). Each side has its own story or word, its own testimony or judgment, as it were. Each side justifies its way of looking at things. The way of the world sets itself against God's word concerning his Son, and thus against the Son and the eternal life he gives us. It is the way of wrongdoing, of sin leading even to death (cf. vv. 16–17). This is the way of "the evil one," who keeps the world under his seducing "power" (cf. v. 19). It amounts to living under the spell of a lie. Thus the way of the world is to be overcome through *faith* in the Son of God (cf. vv. 4–5), giving the believer spiritual eyes to see reality as God sees it.

The way of life is God's own way of calling a thing what it is. It is far *greater* than "the testimony of men" (v. 9). It is the way of faith in the Son, who is the Truth (cf. Jn 14:6), to whom "the Spirit of truth" testifies in us (1 Jn 5:6b, cf. Jn 14:16–17). In John's teaching, the courtroom takes place inwardly, in our hearts, where faith takes root in the believer, in "everyone who has been born of God" (1 Jn 5:4): "Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself" (v. 10a). This spiritual (i.e., of the Spirit) way of life leads to "the love of God. . . . We keep his commandments" (cf. v. 3), so that "everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning" (cf. v. 18). We live by faith under God's command and protection (cf. v. 18).

But why would God need to testify, as in a courtroom, concerning his Son?

Against whom is God defending his Son, and for what purpose? In John's image of the courtroom, the world's judgment is against those born of God, who foolishly put their belief in his Son. Are not death, evil, and sin rampant in the world? God must be a liar. Faith in his Son has not changed anything! This is the testimony of the world against us. Over against this false judgment, God testifies to the truth in order to defend and console his sons against the attacks of the world. The Spirit of truth, the paraclete or defender (defense lawyer, cf. Jn 16:7–11) bears witness to the truth in the sons of God, assuring them that God is right and the world is wrong about the Son. God is no liar. His testimony is true. His judgment concerning the way things really are is trustworthy, in spite of what the world might think, say, or do.

We can be confident that God is trustworthy in his testimony because he always delivers on his word. The apostle reminds God's sons that they have a God who does what he says. The same God has promised to hear our prayers and answer them (1 Jn 5:14–15). Do you want to know if God's testimony is true? Ask God to deliver you from sin, and he will give you life (cf. v. 16). One could extend the argument: Ask God to protect you from "the evil one" and he will not touch you (cf. v. 18). With the spiritual eyes of belief in the Son, we can be sure that God's word is reliable, that we have indeed overcome the world through faith in his Son (cf. vv. 4–5), even when it does not seem like it because of what we see in a world full of evil, sin, and death.

The assigned text can be used to paint a picture of a courtroom for the congregation. Attention can be drawn to the world's judgment against the church, namely, that it is wrong about eternal life in Christ, and thus God is a liar and faith is an illusion. Speak to the evidence the devil ("the ruler of this world," Jn 12:31) brings to the table against the accused (the church), namely, pictures of sin, death, and evil all around us. Then, in a stark contrast, draw attention to God's own judgment concerning the accused. The church need not fear the attacks of the world. It can stand firm because it is right about Jesus and the life God brings us through him. The Spirit of truth is the defense lawyer (Paraclete) through whom God assures the church that faith in the Son is the real deal. And what is God's evidence? His word is enough for our assurance and consolation. But the preacher will also note that the very existence of the church, where disciples are preserved from sin by this word, live by this same word, and respond to it in prayer trusting in God's deliverance, is yet another sign that God is no liar. Life in the Son shines even now in and through the sons of God! Their lives of faith and love for one another are a witness that God's testimony has taken root in their hearts (cf. 1 Jn 3:23–24, 4:7–12).

The preacher will announce God's final verdict on the matter. The devil is a liar. God is telling the truth concerning his Son. The church is not the accused. God has come to its defense. Rather, the church is the beneficiary of God's life through faith in his Son and has the victory over the world and its false claims. Actually, the world and the evil one end up being the accused (cf. Jn 12:31, 16:8–11). Life overcomes death. Faith in the Son assures us of this glad verdict now, even as it trusts in God's final fulfillment of this word at the last day (cf. Jn 6:40).

Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.

The Feast Day of Pentecost is the fiftieth day of the Easter season, the eighth day beyond the seven weeks of seven days. It is the culmination of the joyous, uninterrupted feast of the resurrection of Christ Jesus. It is the end of the beginning (the celebration of the risen Christ among his people) and the beginning of the end (the church's ongoing life in the Spirit with hope toward the coming Day of the Lord). On this day God poured out the Spirit of the resurrection upon the disciples and the church (Acts 2:1–21) as the apostles gathered in Jerusalem on the Feast of Weeks (the first fruits of the wheat harvest) and celebrated the giving of the law. Only the harvest is now the first fruits of the "new heaven and new earth, where righteousness dwells" (2 Pt 3:13). Until the Day of the Lord comes in which the new heaven and earth will be established, the church lives by hope in those "things that are to come" (Jn 16:13), the reign and rule of the Lord God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As Jesus told the apostles, "If I do not go away, the helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (Jn 16:7). The Spirit of the Lord will declare the truth, taking what belongs to Jesus and declaring it to the church. Among what belongs to Jesus is his resurrected life and his victory over sin, sinners, death, Satan, and hell, all celebrated in the Easter feast. Until the Day of the resurrected Lord, the church is not left alone. The Lord pours out the Easter gift: the resurrection Spirit fills the lives of the apostles. Here is the beginning of the end. The flames of the living Spirit upon the apostles signal the fulfillment of the Prophet Joel's word: "In the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh" (Acts 2:17). In the anointing of the Spirit there is the life of the resurrected Jesus. God put his Spirit within his apostolic church on the day of Pentecost, and the church lives (Ez 37:14), "an exceedingly great army" (Ez 37:10).

Peter's Pentecost sermon announces the fulfillment of God's promise. The apostles proclaimed in the tongues/languages of the world the mighty saving deeds of God culminating in the resurrection of the Son of God. The Spirit is active in Peter's words convicting the hearers concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. As a result the Israelites from all nations cry out for mercy and life and repent and are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. It is the Pentecost of the Jewish church, the new Israel, and the first fruits of the church. Yet, even Peter's words hint that the mighty deeds of God are even mightier: "For the promise is for . . . everyone who is far off, everyone whom the Lord God calls to himself." Even Peter was shocked to realize that the promise extended to those outside Israel. So, God commands him to show no partiality and to preach Jesus Christ the Lord to Cornelius and the Gentiles in Caesarea. And while Peter is preaching "the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word" (Acts 10:44). It is Pentecost again, the Pentecost of the Gentiles. So, by the anointing of the Spirit, the Gentiles are grafted into the original stock of Jewish believers. The gift of the resurrection comes to fruition in the Gentile Pentecost as peoples of all the nations die and rise in the baptismal bath of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost Day should celebrate the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon Jewish and Gentile believers. It should be a baptismal celebration day. Those not baptized at

the Easter vigil should be baptized today. And in the divine service consider replacing the public confession and absolution with a rite of baptismal remembrance and renewal, perhaps including anointing of the forehead and hands in remembrance of baptismal identity and the life of Christian service. Read the word in the languages of the world, especially those spoken in your corner of the global community. Burn candles on special candelabras and candle stands throughout the nave. And focus on the paschal candle on this Easter finale. End the service with the procession of the candle out the doors of the church into the world that God seeks to reclaim for himself. So, bear witness “that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).

Kent Burreson

Holy Trinity • Acts 2:14a, 22–36 • May 31, 2015

The Christian confession of the Trinity is both sublime and difficult. Trying to grasp the distinction of the divine persons while maintaining the unity of the Godhead can feel like an abstraction that places God further away from us instead of drawing near. The distinctions are important as the language of the Athanasian Creed gives us proper guidance for faithfulness in our worship and public profession. But the assumed biblical narrative also remains rather hidden. The revelation of God’s mighty and saving act as it unfolds in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is both the source and goal of our doctrine of the Trinity. Peter’s powerful sermon at Pentecost paints the Trinity in the living color of promise and fulfillment, hope beyond hope, the end of the world, and a new beginning.

Peter’s sermon is about Jesus and centers on two points: he is the Christ and he is Lord. The argument is structured as a chiasm beginning with his proof that a) Jesus is indeed the promised Christ, followed by his argument that b) God has raised Jesus up as Lord, and concluding with the confession that God has truly made Jesus b¹) Lord and a¹) Christ. For both arguments, Peter sets forth a passage from the Psalms as the basis for this confession. For Peter, gifted now with the Holy Spirit, all that has taken place was promised long ago and has unfolded according to God’s “definite plan and foreknowledge.” In spite of all appearances, the death of Jesus does not negate the “mighty works, wonders and signs” of God. These divine works certainly attested to the messianic presence of Jesus, but Peter says so did his crucifixion and what’s more, his resurrection! For the Davidic hope that God would “not let his Holy One see corruption” is a messianic hope. The psalm (16:8–11) drives one beyond the poetic confidence of a long-dead king and to a living confession of the Christ who though crucified has now risen: “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.” Beyond hope and expectation, the Scriptures testify to just this sort of Christ—one who dies and lives again.

But that is not all. The rejection of God’s Christ ends in a great reversal so that Jesus now rules over all things, even his enemies. Jesus is Lord and this too is promised from of old: “Yahweh said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies

your footstool” (Ps 110:1). Again, Peter shows how David speaks beyond his own context to that which is almost inconceivable—the Christ is not only a king in the Davidic throne over Israel, he shares the power and authority of the divine throne, ruling over the cosmos. So what must this mean, asks Peter? It means that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, whom God delivered up to be crucified by the wicked . . . whom God raised from the dead . . . whom God gave his promised Holy Spirit to pour out on his own . . . whom God exalted to his right hand to share in his power as Lord over all things.

Here the Trinity is not an abstract concept but the self-emptying, philanthropic God who enters into the human story and takes the reigns of history from the inside, directing it to a conclusion that puts evil to an end. Here God gives us words and prayers with a new life and meaning, prayers spoken by Jesus and given to us by his Spirit that calls forth a beautiful hope: “The Lord [is] always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken. . . . You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence!”

Erik Herrmann

Proper 5 • 2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1 • June 7, 2015

Christians are faced with the realities of this world. We cannot escape this. Along with the joys that come from life, we also face the trials and tribulations that come with living in a broken world. These present realities can wear down a Christian’s faith. And some people might abandon the faith altogether because of the present realities they experience. And yet, God’s word reminds us of another reality and realm in which the Christian lives life.

During this time in the church calendar, the church focuses on the work of the Holy Spirit. He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. Today’s epistle focuses on the Spirit as he works in the life of the believer to keep the Christian in the faith by giving a new set of glasses through which to live out life in dual realities.

Textual Notes

Verse 4:13: Paul cites Psalm 116:10 (115:1 LXX) as he identifies himself with the psalmist’s situation. Scholars debate whether “having ($\pi\mu$ ω) the same Spirit/spirit of faith” refers to having the same “attitude” or “disposition” of the psalmist, or whether it is a reference to the same Spirit of God that they share. Gordon Fee points out that this section in 2 Corinthians is a continuation of what has been in process since 2:14. Paul’s concern is to point out that the psalmist, under the old covenant, and Paul himself along with all Christians, under the new covenant, share the same Spirit who creates and sustains faith in God.¹

Verse 4:14: Paul grounds his Christian hope in two promises of God. The first promise is in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul knows and believes that the one who

raised Jesus by his power will also raise Paul and fellow Christians by that very same power. The second promise is that he will bring Paul and all Christians into his presence. These two future realities are brought into the life of the Christian as a present reality through faith in Christ and the power of his Spirit. It is the “now-not yet” tension in the believer’s life with God.

Verse 4:16: μ “so we do not lose heart.” gives the reason for Paul’s never-say-die spirit. Verse 16a picks up 4:1 in regard to the ministry of the mercy of God under the new covenant. The Christian lives in two realities. One reality is that we live in and with the consequences of sin. This can come in many forms: sickness, illness, and death; persecution of Christian brothers and sisters who are being crucified and murdered simply because they are Christian; struggling or broken relationships; and financial struggles to name a few (Gn 3). Christians are not exempt from this reality. Even though these are real, nevertheless they truly are transient. The other reality is God’s future reality for his people brought to us in the present by means of the Spirit, namely the resurrection hope. God delivers this through his word and sacraments. “To renew” (νακαινώ) does not appear often in Paul’s epistles. It is used as a verb here and in Colossians 3:10, and as a noun in Romans 12:2 and Titus 3:5. This “renewing” and “renewal” is the work of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life.

Verse 4:18: Paul exhorts the Christians to take a look at what they are “taking a look at.” In other words, through what lenses does the Christian “see” and therefore live out life? With what lenses does the Christian examine and discern current reality? Shall the Christian focus on the temporal transient realities of this world alone? No, since this is what the “god of this world” uses to blind and veil the unbeliever’s focus (4:4). Or shall the Christian view life by gazing into God’s eternal promises? Paul distinguishes between “seeing” and “looking” using βλέπω “to see” and σκοπός “to pay attention to; to watch closely” with a sense of “regard as your aim.” Paul moves from the world’s present reality, which is seen with eyes, to the unseen world of God’s rule and reign, which is seen through faith in Christ. Christians are to “watch closely” and “regard as your aim” God’s present and future rule and reign in their lives. As Christians, we must live our earthly lives in this fallen world. Paul did not trivialize this, and neither should we. We face our realities as resurrection Christians who experience God’s mercy and grace. That is why Paul can say with a never-say-die conviction, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed” (4:8–9).

What could be a possible sermon from this text? The preacher can address these two realities in which Christians live. Help fit the hearer with God’s glasses in order to live through life’s present realities governed by God’s eternal reality, even now in the present.

Michael J. Redeker

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 323.

Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul rides a roller coaster of emotion. In the opening apology, Paul defends himself against accusations of carelessness and callousness (1:8–2:16). He then writes with joy concerning his apostolic mission and of the glory of the gospel (2:16–4:6). But while the gospel has glory, a minister of the gospel should not expect plenty of glory. So far as appearances go, the opposite is often the case. Nevertheless, Paul trusts in the steadfast love of God. In weakness, God is proving the power of the gospel. Paul will have, in exchange for the weight of suffering here, “an eternal weight of glory” hereafter (4:17).

In 5:1–10, Paul uses a number of strong, balanced contrasts (“at home” *ἠδημέω*/“away from” *κδημέω*; “earthly home”/“heavenly dwelling”; etc.) to illustrate the separation that characterizes this life. Hoping for the future body, which is from God in the heavens, not made with hands, and eternal, we live in present bodies, which are earthly, temporary, and separated from full communion with Christ.

While this separation is stated as a fact (*οἶδα* in 5:1), it is not absolute. Indeed, we are always of good courage (*θαρραυνοτες . . . πάντοτε*; 5:6; cf. 5:8) for through the first installment of the Spirit we are linked with Christ (cf. 2 Cor 1:22). The Spirit whom the Father has given (note the aorist, *δος*, in 5:5) is the present guarantor of our future salvation.

A further operation of the Spirit is that we “know” (*οἶδα* in 5:6; cf. 4:14; 5:11, 16) the nature and condition of our present pilgrimage. In Paul’s writings, the Christian way of life is closely linked to baptism. Through baptism we receive the Spirit and participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Baptism then puts to an end walking in sin (Col 3:7), gives victory over “human ways” (1 Cor 3:3), and puts the “walk in the flesh” in the past (2 Cor 10:2ff.). We are now controlled by Christ and his Spirit (5:14; cf. 12:18).

Yet the phrase in 5:7 (*δι πίστεως . . . περιπατομεν*) is unique. It is the only instance of *περιπατέω* with the preposition *διά*. This pairing “denotes not the nature, but the accompanying circumstance of the walk.”¹ We should expect, then, that our life in this world is marked by boldness *and* “groaning” (*στενάζω*, repeated in 5:2, 4). Groaning is the result of the eager longing of the Spirit (cf. Rom 8:26), and this God-given, Spirit-driven longing to have our perishable bodies replaced by something permanent is evidence that full communion with the Father is possible through Jesus Christ who died for all. Guarding against presumption or despair, Paul admonishes that in all things we strive to “be acceptable to him” (5:9).

Armed with this knowledge, Paul encourages us to persevere through hardships and to proclaim God’s offer of forgiveness and reconciliation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (5:11–17) for all is not as it seems. Just as we do not consider Jesus from a human perspective but through the eyes of faith, believing he died for all and was raised, we do not look at one another or ourselves from the world’s point of view. All who are in Christ are now a new creation.

In a world in which the future can appear to be frightening either because of past sins or present confinements, this text brings a strong word of hope: *all is not as it seems*.

No matter the circumstances of our lives and our world, God is doing a new thing through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus illustrates the power of the gospel with the parable of the tiny mustard seed that becomes a great shrub that shelters the birds (Mk 4:30–32). Ezekiel describes God planting a young and tender twig, and it becomes “a noble cedar” (Ez 17:22–24). In worship, we are brought to the cross of Christ—the tree of life into which we are grafted through holy baptism and sustained with its fruit in the supper we share. It may not look like much, but it grows with a power beyond our understanding.

Daniel Eggold

¹ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Online ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:374.

Proper 7 • 2 Corinthians 6:1–13 • June 21, 2015

Servants of God as a Study in Contrasts

This text follows on the heels of the well-known “glorious exchange” passage at the end of chapter 5, “God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” Our text begins by telling us that we will be working with him—the one whom God made sin, even though he knew no sin. Just like our Savior, our text is a study in contradictions and contrasts: the one who knew no sin is made sin; the immortal one dies for us because he identifies with us and our sin; the king takes the role of a servant so that his servants can be kings. All of this happened at “the acceptable time,” the right time, the time most favorable to accomplish our salvation.

In everything that happens to us, Paul says, we are called to commend ourselves as servants of God. As his servants we can expect, on the one hand, to need endurance as we experience what it means to be a servant of God in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger. Despite the fact that most of us have probably not had all of these experiences, both pastors and laypeople can identify with any number of these when we take our calling as servants of God seriously. It would be good to unpack a few of these that your people have likely experienced rather than glossing over the list. Everybody has had afflictions, hardships, and distresses at one time or another. But have they had them in service to the gospel? Beatings and imprisonments—perhaps not as much, unless one takes a more allegorical approach to those terms, which I would not recommend. Then again, as the culture wars heat up and Christianity becomes more and more marginalized in our society, these could become the reality here in the United States that they already are in many parts of the world where Christians are dying for their faith. Work and sleeplessness are definitely twenty-first-century maladies, but again we need to remember that Paul is talking about all of these in service to the gospel. When was the last time you lost sleep over kingdom work?

On the other hand, we are also to commend ourselves as servants of God in a list Paul gives us that is reminiscent of the Galatians 5 “fruits of the Spirit”: in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love (etymologically love that is “not hypocritical”), in the word of truth, in the power of God (speak of these, too). In all these things we commend ourselves as servants—all things that Paul himself experienced. He was a living sermon illustration of what it means to serve God in a hypertolerant world that considers God irrelevant and his servants, at best, a nuisance and at worse, non-conformists.

The two lists are a study in contrasts. The first list brings out the difficulties of the Christian’s calling; the second list provides the means to carry out that calling, with the Holy Spirit at the center structurally and theologically. None of this is possible for us without him. Beginning with the second half of verse 7, we begin with a new list as *in* gives way to *through* and then *as*. (1) We are servants *in* our struggles as well as *in* the spiritual gifts we are given. (2) We are servants *through* the tools of righteousness we are given and also *through* our experiences whether glorious or dishonorable, whether slandered or praised. (3) We are servants of God when we are regarded *as* all those things which Paul lists in verses 8a–10—a study in contrasts, contradictions, and paradoxes if there ever was one. Any number of these could be examined further as well.

But in all of this we commend ourselves, along with Paul, as servants of God. The servant, of course, experienced all these as well, for us, at the right time, for our salvation when he became sin for us. The one who was himself a study in contrasts, contradictions, and paradoxes asks no less of his servants and gives no less than his Spirit to make it happen.

Joel Elowsky

Proper 8 • 2 Corinthians 8:1–9; 13–15 • June 28, 2015

Paul urges the Corinthians to finish up their part of the collection for the church in Jerusalem. They started a year earlier, setting aside an amount each week. But it seems the giving had slowed down such that it would not be ready in time for Titus to receive it. But notice Paul doesn’t use the accusing law to beat them down. Rather, he uses a variety of motivations for them to finish up the collection. Hence, the law in this sermon is not a long accusation of poor giving, but it moves toward an encouragement to excel in generosity.

Even though money is not mentioned, it’s what Paul is referring to as an “act of grace.” The text is not primarily a set of principles for stewardship in general, which includes time and talents, although it could serve in that way; rather, Paul urges giving money generously to help the saints in the church. Note also he refers to the church in Jerusalem as saints, not the poor.

Lutheran theology rightly emphasizes the gospel as motivation for giving. While most commentaries will claim Paul is holding up Jesus as the example par excellence for generosity in vv. 8–9 (which is law—doing what Jesus did), the sermon below

proclaims Jesus becoming poor for us as gospel which then calls us to give generously. However, Paul does not restrict his motivation for giving to the gospel. When you look at what Paul says, you find he uses a variety of reasons for the Corinthians to give: appealing to their competitiveness by comparing them to the Macedonian church, pushing them to excel like they have with other gifts, warning them not to lose face by not finishing the collection, and calling them to be as earnest as he has boasted about them to others. In the sermon, besides the gospel motivation, appeals are made to the positive examples of other believers, and the call is to excel in generosity.

Excel in Generosity

I'm going to describe a congregation for you. It's one from about twenty-five years after Jesus rose from the dead. The people lived in poverty. Civil wars had decimated the country. Then the Romans came and finished the job. There were high taxes and only a few good jobs. Most people had very little to live on. Add to that, persecution. The small congregation was not welcome in the town, and the members may have been unemployed, ostracized, and even beaten.

Now this church would seem to be a prime candidate for another congregation's help, for someone to show them generosity in their great need. And you would be wrong. Paul had started congregations in Macedonia—we know them as the Philippians and Thessalonians—and even Paul didn't expect them to give generously. He knew the tough conditions they lived in. But when Paul got up a collection for the church in Jerusalem, which was living under even worse conditions, these Macedonian churches gave willingly. They gave more than they could afford. They gave joyfully. They gave generously. They gave to fellow believers they had never met and probably would never see. Paul called this gift of money an act of grace. These churches excelled at generosity.

(I inserted a story here about a woman who needed food for her family. But when offered food by an Episcopalian rector at Christmastime, she led him to another family in more need. That woman, like the Macedonian believers, excelled at generosity. See <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2004/december/15668.html>.)

Now I'm going to tell you of another congregation. This one too is from the early years of the church. It was in a good location. Some of the members had money and were well known in the community. Some were knowledgeable and gifted speakers. This congregation had started a collection for the church in Jerusalem nearly a year earlier. They had a plan. They set aside money every week so that they would meet their goal when Paul sent Titus to collect it.

Now this sounds just like a place with members who would be generous and giving, doesn't it? Well, once again you would be wrong. This congregation, the Corinthians, needed some encouragement from Paul. It seems they had fallen behind in the collection. They had slacked off. The giving became irregular and then petered out. Do you catch the irony? The poverty-stricken congregations gave generously, more than they could; the richer congregation failed in this act of grace; they slacked off.

I don't believe I need to do much to apply this to today's church life. Too many Christian organizations and congregations struggle with unmet commitments, budget

shortfalls, and lack of support. I'll summarize it this way: If you're not giving something away generously each week, something has gone awry each week.

So Paul challenges the Corinthians to excel at generosity. He gives them the Macedonians as an example to emulate. Paul wants the excellence in generosity shown by some churches to be a guiding model for others. Give joyfully. Give more than you can. Give as an act of grace, not because you feel forced too. Give because it has become second nature to you. Excel in generosity.

(I had prepared a poster board with an outline of a cross. "Reason!" was written in the center as that word would lead into the gospel proclamation.) Now, I'm going to ask you a question and ask for some answers. What does someone need to do to become a really good pianist? What does it take to excel at playing the piano? (I wrote their answers—a good teacher, practice, goals, a love for music, study, devotion to the task, talent—on the cross around the word "Reason!").

To excel at something means you have a *reason* to practice, to give yourself to the task, and to study. Paul gives the Corinthians that reason: Jesus. Jesus is rich. Incredibly rich. All of the heavenly glories are his. He is God himself, eternally worthy of all praise and honor. Yet, he became poor for us. On that first Christmas, he humbled himself and became one of us. He lowered himself to be born. He left no doubt he had come in poverty—a barn, a royal line yet a poor family, visiting shepherds instead of a palace guard. He became obedient under the law for one purpose: to make us rich. He became obedient even to death on a cross to give us the riches of being forgiven and restored to God's family.

Jesus's act of grace on the cross is the reason for us to excel in generosity. We are so rich in Jesus that generosity should be second nature to us. Just as he supplied what we could not, now he calls us to supply what other believers cannot. Here's another story that moved me to study, practice, and get better at excelling in generosity (YouTube: Handful of Rice—Mizoram, India). What a wonderful example of what it means to give each day so that you can give generously. Paul urged the Corinthians to excel at generosity. He encourages you to do that as well. (Adapted from a sermon preached in December 2014.)

Glenn Nielsen

Proper 9 • 2 Corinthians 12:1–10 • July 5, 2015

Exegetical Notes

If one has been preaching through 2 Corinthians with the lectionary, then the isagogical issues have been addressed, including the question of the number of letters and visits to the Corinthian congregation (discussions are available in commentaries and summarized in most study Bibles). This lesson skips ahead to chapter 12, where we find Paul defending his apostleship, but many of the earlier themes lie in the background, such as "fixing our eyes on the things unseen" (4:18), living not for oneself, but in the

new creation, by God's grace (5:15–17). Paul has begun to “boast” in his hardships in chapter 6, and now he addresses such boasting as so much foolishness. But, if he “must,” then he will turn attention to our human weakness and the power of God in Christ.

Chapter 12 continues the thought of chapter 11, as he “must” (δε) continue boasting (καυχομαι appears thirty-two times in the NT, twenty of which are in 2 Corinthians and ten of which are in 11:16–12:10). But Paul continues to boast about all the “wrong” things. He is clearly defending himself against both false apostles and the claims that he was not a true apostle, but instead of engaging in the same one-upmanship, his “foolish” boasting (if he must [again, δε]) “shows his weakness” (, 11:30).

Chapter 12 includes two chronic interpretative problems, neither of which is easily resolved. The first is the *rapture* referred to in verses 2–4, which, though his modesty in boasting couches it in the third person, is something Paul himself has experienced. Whatever it is, this is not a reference to his Damascus road experience (which would have occurred more than fourteen years earlier); perhaps the reference is to his time after his conversion, in Arabia or Tarsus. In the background are claims of others to “super-revelations” of some kind, and instead of relating his encounter with the risen Christ (a point already made in 1 Cor 9:1–2), in 2 Corinthians he substitutes the lowly narrative of escaping Damascus in a basket (11:30–33). Here in chapter 12 he mentions almost in passing a revelation that could have been used to great effect in his boasting, but he dismisses it as “not the kind of thing to boast about.” Similar is his handling of charismatic gifts in 1 Corinthians 14:17–19 paraphrased as, “I can speak in tongues more than all of you, but it’s no big deal.”

The use of the third person may not simply be modesty; it may suggest that this experience is beyond the actual Paul as sinner-saint, but of a person “in Christ” (v. 2, cf. Gal 2:20), which is a far greater credential than even a “super” (or “not-so-super”) apostle. Of such a man, but not himself, Paul will boast (v. 5). Unlike the apocalypse journeys of intertestamental accounts, Paul claims an anonymity and uncertainty as to what actually happened (repeating “whether in the body or not, only God knows”) so as to downplay the specifics.

If Paul does speak about himself, in the flesh, he does so by highlighting the weakness of the famous “thorn” (, stake, splinter, pointed stick?—though likely not in any way an oblique reference to crucifixion). This is the second interpretative problem, and one should avoid getting lost in speculation about the specifics; we have already noted that Paul does not. Again, the vagueness and generality is part of the point: whatever it was (or could be for others), even as an “angel/messenger of Satan,” his prayers for relief were answered in the negative, three times no less (a sense of completion with echoes of Jesus’s prayer in Gethsemane. One notes also the reference to the “third heaven” in v. 2 and the impending third visit in v. 14).

If this affliction was a messenger of Satan, what was the message? The temptation is real in every age: “if God doesn’t show his power over this my affliction, then he’s not good enough to be my god (or I’m not good enough to be his person).” Having in one’s body a messenger of Satan is also a contrast to the godly angels that usually accompanied the claims of the super-apostles on their apocalyptic journeys into the

heavens and around the heavenly throne. Again, against such claims, Paul's "angel" is satanic; a reminder of the weakness of the sinful flesh, reminding him of the struggle of our earthly lives, even "in Christ" but too easily against Christ.

The argumentation leads to the climactic claim of vv. 9–10, which is the likely focus and theme of the sermon: God's answer to prayer is this: God's power is made "perfect" (= completed) in Paul's weakness. The final line is a piece of the great reversal: when we are weak (in ourselves), then we are strong in Christ.

Homiletical Thoughts

One may well use this text to take on the pervasive perversion of "happiness gospel" and a false theology of glory so endemic to a Christianity driven by worldly values. Paul's own "prayer testimonial" is focused on how God answered his prayer. He did *not* deliver him of his affliction, and instead turned him to a more profound understanding of grace and power. It is not about how God fixes our problems but how he gives us a new way of evaluating life and valuing reality as "new creation" people in Christ.

But the new creation does not free us from the old—if already, then also not yet. And even among those within the body of Christ, things can go very badly indeed, between the members and against the apostolic authority. Even after two visits and anticipating a third, this congregation remains a troubled and divisive mess.

To such all-too-familiar issues of Christian life together, Paul moves in a direction opposite that of simply claiming a power and authority "better than" anyone else in order to sort things out. He notes that, in the end, he can make no claims on God (as should no others, either), and that any "boasting" must be grounded in weakness and humility, even as the cross itself is a sign and reminder of our sin and lack of any claims at all before God. In a practical sense, "conflict resolution" starts with the humility of confession and repentance, *coram deo* and then *coram* one another.

But beyond conflict resolution lies a whole new way of defining reality, not by might or by power, or even by spiritual gifts or by healings, or by how God answered my prayer my way, but by the cross and resurrection in which the old has passed away and the new has come (5:17). God's strength comes down in weakness; he identifies with the lowly; he rises to the power of life through death. God's answer to prayer is his strength in our relationship with Christ. This is a value system and reality completely dependent on God's goodness and grace, and on his definitions of life and peace, which are ours already in Christ.

Andrew H. Bartelt

Proper 10 • Ephesians 1:3–16 • July 12, 2015

Here is a passage of great comfort that is a blessing and help in times of hardship and times of plenty. Paul thoroughly grounds the promises of predestination to salvation

in the gospel of Jesus Christ and thereby assures us of the durability of the promise in the face of the troubles and difficulties of this present age.

God has given us great blessings in Christ Jesus and great spiritual blessings in the heavenly places. While it is difficult to know precisely what these blessings in heaven are, the implication is that they are vastly superior to the blessings we have in this life. God has chosen us in Christ from the foundation of the world. God who has invested so much in us that he chooses us from the beginning will keep his promises to us. Paul emphasizes the holiness and blamelessness of those adopted by God. God has done all of this because of the riches of Christ's work on the cross, where he has redeemed us and forgiven us all things. God is rich toward us both according to his grace and according to the gifts he lavishes on us, including wisdom and understanding. The Messiah Jesus is the secret Paul speaks about, a secret openly declared which the world can neither appreciate nor apprehend. And all things will be reconciled in Christ Jesus and manifestly brought together under his eventual rule.

We are also predestined by God through the Messiah, and he does as he wills. Our life is therefore a manifestation of his praise and glory. We also have both belief in the Messiah and the seal of the Holy Spirit, the guarantee that we are God's own people, for his praise and glory. Paul then gives thanks for those who have faith in Christ and love for the saints, by implication those in the above paragraphs, and he never stops giving thanks for the Ephesians as he prays for them.

This is a text in which the law is implied but not expressed clearly. The implication arises out of those who are not in the group mentioned as predestined, and those who do not have faith manifesting love as mentioned in the final verse. The *why* of this is something we cannot answer. The verses presented emphasize the great work God has done in our lives, first by selecting us from the beginning, second by redeeming us in Christ Jesus and third by providing us lives of faith in him to love our neighbors. Paul just keeps piling on the good news here.

Here we have a clear possibility for using this paradigm for preaching the text. The righteousness of God in Christ Jesus has provided us with the abundant assurances and benefits of being God's special people, chosen by him from the beginning. These benefits have their manifest fulfillment at the cross, where the long-term plans of God are revealed and fulfilled for those with eyes to see by faith, but where those who choose not to believe see nothing worthwhile and have their hearts hardened. It is through the durability of these promises applied to us that we find both the faithfulness and strength to love our neighbors, marking us as those distinctive people God has chosen from the beginning.

A good way I have found to deal with the issue of predestination is through emphasis on the durability of God's promises to us, and this is a good text to illustrate this. God works mightily to save us and has done so through many plans and promises that he has set out and fulfilled to do so. We can therefore have faith and rely on God, who has done so much and brought us so far to continue to fulfill his promises to us in Christ Jesus. This durability of the promises is a good way for more existentially minded people to apprehend and appreciate what the eternity of God really means for us.

Timothy Dost

I say to my students with some regularity, “Careful exegesis often makes the text harder to preach.” What I mean, of course, is that the concerns of a particular text of Scripture might not, at first glance, be the sorts of things that concern a Christian/Lutheran congregation in twenty-first-century North America. When this is the case, there are several options. One can opt for a topical sermon that begins from the text and moves on to other pericopes before synthesizing and offering helpful truth for God’s people; this is fine. One could, of course, ignore the text’s concerns and use the reading as a pretext. (I know about this one because I’ve done it often enough over the years.) Or, one can try to discern the text’s interests, and the questions to which it gives answers—and then apply that.

This reading from Ephesians is about what God in Christ has done for people. Easy enough. Even better, it proclaims that people who were far off have been brought near, that people whose relationship with God was chaotic and hate-filled and alienated have been reconciled to God. Hooray! The death of Christ, his “blood” has done this and divisions have been removed.

Here’s the difficult part of the text. The people who were far off were Gentiles and they were far off precisely because they were not faithful Israelites. They had no access to Israel’s covenants with God, and they were not living in response to God’s mercy by seeking to keep his commands in the law of Moses (3:11–12). They were without God in the world. Paul proclaims in these verses the Gentiles’ reconciliation and peace with God—but even more emphatically, he proclaims the Gentiles’ reconciliation and peace with Israelites, with Christ-believing Jews. The good news is that the Gentile believers now fully belong as household members (3:19) to the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus (Eph 1:3). To be sure, this is so because they have been set into place as part of the building founded on the apostles and prophets who in turn take their direction and orientation from the cornerstone which is Jesus himself. In this reading, however, the negative “before” was Gentile alienation from God’s covenant people. The positive “but now” primarily (though not exclusively) consists of being made into a unity with Jewish believers.

Therefore, when Paul says and then explicates that “Christ himself is our peace” (v. 14), his concern primarily (though not exclusively) is to proclaim the peace between Jewish believer and Gentile believer. The both have become one; the law of Moses that divided the two has been torn down so that the two types of people might become one new man in Christ (3:14–15). The hatred and alienation between Jew and Gentile has been killed in Jesus’s own body (3:16). And now (to borrow a bit from Romans) there is no distinction; both Jew and Gentile have access in one Spirit to the same Father (3:18).

The issue of “Jew and Gentile,” however, is scarcely an issue for us today. In an attempt to apply *this* central theme of *this particular* reading, I suggest at least two directions for application. First, this would be a good text if the pastor wanted to supplant any sort of sinfully divisive thinking or behavior in the congregation with Christ-centered unity. The preacher can use a graphic image such as this: “When you try to

maintain your hatred or your anger or your separation, it's as if you are reaching into the wounds of Jesus—where all of that enmity went—and pulling it out again. Don't do that! Give the separation up! Let go of the anger! Leave it in the wounds of Jesus. He has reconciled you to God, his Father. Now, be reconciled to one another!"

Second, this would be a good text if the pastor wanted to assure all the members of the congregation (and indeed, all of his hearers) that "there is a place for you here, because there is peace and reconciliation for *all* in the body of Jesus." All believers have been brought near—to God and to one another—by his blood (3:13). He killed the alienating enmity for *all* on the cross. No longer is *any* believer a stranger or a foreigner here in the assembly of the baptized. All share the same foundation, the same cornerstone; all belong here as part of God's house and building.

Jeff Gibbs

Proper 12 • Ephesians 3:14–21 • July 26, 2015

How big are we talking? That might be a question that you have discussed if you have ever built a house or a church or any other kind of building. That is the question Paul seems to be addressing in Ephesians 3:14–21. In Ephesians 1 and 2, Paul reminds the Ephesian Christians that they are chosen in Christ and that they are saved by grace through faith, not through works. This is foundational for what seems to be Paul's main concern in Ephesians: that is, should the church, the body of Christ, be for both Jews and Gentiles?

Paul makes a reference to the temple building in 2:14–16. While there had at one time been a building with a dividing wall to separate Jew from Gentile, there is no longer such a wall for those in Christ because the temple of Christ's body was put to death on the cross and then raised so that there is only one new man, one new temple, that is, the one body of Christ. He brings back the imagery of a building in 2:19–22 to explain what the new building project looks like. The foundation is the apostles and prophets with Christ as the cornerstone. The recipients of the letter, though, both Jews and Gentiles are themselves being built into the dwelling of the Spirit of God.

Paul then pauses his discussion of the building to elaborate on his point about Gentiles also being included in the temple of Jesus's body. In 3:1–13, Paul explains his ministry to the Gentiles and how his ministry relates to the history of God's work in the world. In 3:14 he resumes his discussion and comes back to the imagery of the building. So when he gets to 3:18 and is praying that the Ephesian Christians would be able to "comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth," Paul is talking here again about the building. (George Stoeckhardt, a now sainted professor of Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, agreed in his commentary on Ephesians.) Paul is praying that the Ephesian Christians will be able to see the blueprints, so to speak, for the new church construction project, that is the building project of the church of God, the body of Christ. Of course whenever you have a major building project, you always have to ask how big it will be, who will be allowed to use it,

who will pay for it, and so on. Paul basically says that “it is too small a thing” (Is 49:6) if the church is only big enough for Jews. Paul prays that the Ephesians will be able to understand the massive size of the building project of which they are a part. And who will be paying for, working on, and completing this massive project? That answer comes in 3:20–21: the Lord of course, who is able to do more than we could ever imagine.

As you prayerfully prepare to preach this pericope, reflect on whether the congregation you shepherd has conceived of the building project of Christ’s church as too narrow, too short, too shallow, and too small. Has the congregation been hesitant to include a certain demographic in your neighborhood as the Jewish Christians were excluding Gentiles in Paul’s day? Take them through our great Lutheran distinctive of salvation by faith alone apart from works to help expand their perspective that the church, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as the cornerstone, is truly big enough to include all the family groups of the world, even in their own neighborhood.

Benjamin Haupt

Proper 13 • Ephesians 4:1–16 • August 2, 2015

Paul has regaled the Ephesians with rich spiritual blessings they have in Christ (Eph 1), how both Jews and Gentiles are saved by grace alone through faith alone (Eph 2), how the mystery of the gospel has been revealed by the Spirit through the very human apostles and prophets; Paul then prays for spiritual strength for the Christians in Ephesus (Eph 3). Pastors may have already preached on these three themes in the prior Sundays.

Paul then does a paraenetic shift with “therefore” in 4:1. Paul “urges” (παροῦ καλῶ) them to walk in a manner worthy of their calling in Christ. He enumerates characteristics (elsewhere called fruit of the Spirit) like humility, gentleness, love, patience and peace. Then he focuses on unity, using the word *one* eight times in verses 4–7. Even the apostles, prophets, and the pastoral office were given for the building up of the unity of this one body, the church (vv. 11–16).

LCMS Lutherans often have a struggle with unity, both within congregations and synodically. Our old Adam desires to do his own thing, strengthened by the individualistic American culture we inhabit. This text helps us to see the importance of the unity of Christ’s body, the church, and the importance of differing gifts, even when we too often seek uniformity over unity.

Sermon Suggestion

I want you to look at your hand. Front, back, each finger, nails, lines, whatever. Consider your hand. What do you like about it? What don’t you like about it? Are there any particular strengths or skills that your hand has? What does it enable you to do? Are there any particular ways that your hand has been difficult or painful to you?

I want you to look at your knee. For many of you it is covered, so you’ll have to remember what it looks like under the clothing. But think about your knee. What do

you like about it? What don't you like about it? Are there any particular strengths that your knee has? What does it enable you to do? Are there any particular ways that your knee has been difficult or painful to you?

Consider both your hand and your knee. How do they benefit you? What would your life be like if you did *not* have your hand? Your knee? Both hands? Both knees? Both your hands and your knees are gifts to you, gifts from God. Sometimes they may be painful to you. Sometimes they may not do what you want them to, what you expect them to. But they are yours and you are much better off with them than without them. They are yours; parts of you unified as one body.

Now, look around the sanctuary, not at the walls, but at the people, not at their hands or knees, but at them. As you look around, ask yourself what particular strengths you see among the people here? What do you like about them? Consider these people around you. They, like your hands and your knees, are a part of you. You are a part of them. We are all parts of the body of Christ. He is our head. Just as your hands and your knees are gifts to you, gifts from God, so are the people around you gifts from God. They may at times be very pleasant gifts from God. At other times, like your hands or your knees or other body parts, they may be difficult or painful to you. Like your hands or your knees, they may not always do what you want them to. But, you know what? They are still part of you. Just like your hands and your knees, you are much better off with them than without them. They enable Christ to accomplish things that you could not do without them. They are yours, you are theirs, parts unified and growing together as one body, the body of Christ, the church.

This, basically, is the message that Paul has for the Ephesians here in our epistle text. He has just spent three chapters captivating them with the marvels that Christ has done for them, many of which we have read over the past three weeks in the epistle lessons. He has proclaimed to them that Christ has predestined them to be his, and comforts them with that thought. Christ has saved them by his gracious intervention on the cross and by his glorious resurrection. He is risen. He has made them alive when they were dead.

Another idea: Cameroon pastor and Concordia Seminary graduate student Jean Baptiste Mberebe found this quote about the African self-understanding of personality: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."¹ This stands in sharp contrast with our Western, Cartesian individualism: "I think, therefore I am."

Rick Marrs

¹ Tapiwa Mucherera, *Pastoral Care from a Third World Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 55.

BOOK REVIEWS

**NEGOTIATING IDENTITY:
Exploring Tensions between Being
Hakka and Being Christian in
Northwestern Taiwan.** By Ethan
Christofferson. Wipf & Stock, 2012. 316
pages. Paper. \$29.60.

Ethan Christofferson is one of a group of sensitive, insightful missionaries of the Lutheran Brethren International Mission, whose ministry has been largely among the Hakka people of Taiwan. (The Hakka are a subgroup of Han Chinese, living largely as an ethnic minority in southern China, including Taiwan, whose tight solidarity is expressed in their own distinct Chinese culture, including language.) Christofferson introduces his study as an outgrowth of his own missionary experience: “What tensions exist between being Hakka . . . and being Christian” (11). With a set of interview questions (287–290), he pursues his quest with thirty-six Hakka informants—both non-Christians and Christians—filters the interviews through a social constructionist paradigm, and offers some interesting proposals.

Several issues stood out as most impactful. One is the historical reality of Hakka people being an ethnic minority, culturally suppressed by Japanese colonial powers before and during World War II and by the Chinese Nationalist government after that war. Response to suppression ranged from defensive withdrawal into a conclave to assimilation with dominant cultures. Recent political openness in Taiwan has invited continued assimilation: As Hakka people have moved into largely non-Hakka communities, and have intermarried with non-Hakka

people, the emphasis on speaking Hakka is diminished and the old traditions and customs have less relevance. Even defining what makes a person Hakka is difficult if language, region, and pedigree are increasingly marginal and if the process of blending cultures is still an active trend. Therefore, when Christofferson speaks of the Hakka people, he prefers more malleable descriptors such as “being Hakka” or “doing things in the Hakka way.” This, in turn, expresses the frustration Christofferson felt in his own ministry, working hard for fluency in the Hakka language, but discovering that not all of the Hakka he was speaking to were as comfortable in, or even loyal to, the ancestral language.

Another major issue is the perception held by many non-Christian Hakka that Christianity is a foreign religion, not proper for Hakka to consider. For those who are more conservative, Christianity is seen as at odds with Hakka history, religious devotion, ancestors, cultural legacy, and family solidarity. One informant observed that for a Hakka to become Christian would demand “the faith of a martyr” (109). For others, Christianity may be proper, even good for Western people, but not for Hakka: “it’s like the difference between a . . . cow and a water buffalo” (181), both good but not interchangeable.

These issues and others suggest to Christofferson that in a society as increasingly mobile as Taiwan’s, identifying and focusing on a “homogeneous people group” such as the Hakka may be anachronistic and extremely confining. While Donald McGavran’s insight that “people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers”

(14) serves as an important reminder that a missionary be sensitive to the cultural heritage and make-up of a people, the reality is that people are on the move, and the traditional culture (even language) may not always be the sole or even primary context of daily life. Specifically, the social movement of recent decades in Taiwan seems toward a multicultural society, sensitive to converging strands, but not reinforcing divergence. Missionary strategy needs to be responsive to changing cultural contexts, whether blending or declining, so that cultural immersion ministry may reflect the life situation of a variety of Hakka: those at the center of Hakka life, those moving to the margins, and those outside the margins but affirming their roots.

The relevance of Christofferson's analysis of a fluid-society Taiwan, and implications for mission outreach to a specific cultural group in that fluid society resonated perfectly with observations for ministry in a Hoklo context—Hoklo refers to an ethnic group loosely called by many, "Taiwanese." Though the Hoklo are the dominant subgroup in Taiwan (70 percent) which would suggest greater ethnic stability, the movement toward multiculturalism is blurring cultural lines among them also, likely exacerbated in earlier days by decades of Nationalist government repression of Taiwanese language and culture, and more recently by Taiwan's increasing movement toward the economy and world of China.

If there is one methodological blip that occurs to this reviewer, it is the limited size of the interview group. Admittedly, Christofferson explained his efforts to diversify by gender, age, education, location, and religious affiliation.

However, when an observation is attributed to an unidentified informant, this reader wonders how widely representative that observation might be (idiosyncratic? or widely representative?), and thus how much weight to put on the observation.

Though this book arises in the narrowly defined cultural context of the Hakka people in Taiwan, the phenomena described and the conclusions drawn have relevance in much wider circles. The corrective it offers to the church growth movement's insight of the "homogeneous people group" is pertinent, challenging, even liberating. This reviewer appreciated also the focus on the question of the role of a missionary in a fluid society. Is it to conserve traditional culture? Is it to facilitate blended or assimilated culture? A likely follow-up question is, how many languages does a missionary need to be relevant to a fluid culture? (Christofferson has added remarkable fluency in Mandarin to his initial fluency in Hakka, and can rattle off a smattering of Taiwanese as well.)

Henry Rowold

INTRODUCCIÓN A LA TEOLOGÍA MESTIZA DE SAN AGUSTÍN. By Justo L. González. Abingdon Press, 2013. 161 pages. Paper. \$19.99.

Editor's note: This review is adapted from a version that first appeared on the Center for Early African Christianity website. <http://earlyafricanchristianity.com/blog/post.php?s=2014-06-25-latin-american-view-of-augustine-a-review>.

We are already accustomed to scholarly and ground-breaking contributions in the areas of church history and US

Latino/Hispanic theology from Justo González. This volume will not disappoint. It offers a new way to approach our Western theological tradition for our edification and pastoral work. González accomplishes this by interpreting Augustine through the hermeneutical lens of *mestizaje* (cultural blending). González describes his task: “In more recent times in dialog with friends and colleagues, such as Orlando Costas, Virgilio Elizondo, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, and others, I began to suspect that Augustine’s restlessness was not only due to his distancing from God, as he explains in his Confessions, but that it was also due to the internal struggle of a person who lived within the tension of two heritages, two cultures, two worldviews—plainly stated, ‘de un mestizo’” (7, reviewer’s translation). This volume engages the reader in re-reading Augustine from the perspective of *mestizaje*, an essential hermeneutical key in re-reading our entire church history (13). Second, this interpretative tool allows González to analyze and understand Augustine as “*un pueblo hispanounidense*,” a people who also live in the struggle of *mestizaje*.

The introduction provides the historical, cultural, and theological reasons to re-read Augustine in light of his *mestizaje*. Chapters 1 through 3 provide Augustine’s personal, intellectual, and theological formations in his quest to understand and serve God. Chapters 4 through 7 show how Augustine, as pastor and bishop, engaged Manichaeism, Donatism, Pelagianism, and the religious paganism in his world. Chapter 8 highlights the importance of Augustine’s theological work for our understanding and re-reading of Western theology.

In the introduction González defines and explains the hermeneutical key of “*mestizaje*” and situates Augustine within his own “*mestizaje*.” When the Germanic people invaded and destroyed the Roman Empire, Augustine’s writings became a bridge between the former Christian tradition and the new historical and cultural conditions. Both the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Church claimed his authority. The majority of Christians reading Paul today do so through the eyes of Augustine. It is important to distinguish this in order to rediscover and correct some of his influences (9–10). González then explains the reading of texts in light of our *mestizaje*. Our reading of the text needs to take into account that we “belong to two realities and at the same time do not belong to either reality” (11). González adds, “It is a rarity that *mestizaje* is simply bipolar, for usually the two poles of this *mestizaje* possess elements of their own *mestizajes*” (13).

Chapter 1 defines important elements of Augustine’s *mestizaje*. González points out the works of the first bishop of Rome and the foundational works for Western theology by Tertullian and Cyprian proceeded from North Africa, not from Rome (17). González describes Thagaste, a small free city of proconsular Numidia, now Souk-Ahras, where Augustine was born. González describes the cultural strata present in this region where Augustine grew, developed, and carried out his pastoral and theological work. These strata may be attributed to a *mestizaje* that occurred in the interaction of Punic and Berber cultures with Roman culture.

Augustine’s *mestizaje* is also a product of his heritage. His father Patrick, a tax collector, was of Roman ancestry

and a pagan most of his life. His mother Monica, more than likely a Berber, was a devout Christian. Augustine learned her Christian faith—a faith that in many ways was opposed to the dominant Roman values and culture. Augustine lived within a Greco-Roman culture within North African cultures. We need to understand this in order to appreciate Augustine’s writings.

In chapter 2 Augustine immigrates to Italy (AD 383). He is still in spiritual turmoil, searching for the truth, not truly satisfied with Manichaeism. In Milan he comes under the influence of Bishop Ambrose. González points out several texts in Augustine’s *Confessions* where it is evident that Ambrose helped Augustine bridge the mestizaje of his father’s Roman culture with the homegrown Christian faith of his mother (38–39). During this period he was greatly influenced by the Neoplatonism of Plotinus. Plotinus allowed him to affirm the reality of the one divinity from which everything flows, and to affirm the spiritual world to counter the Stoics, who affirmed only a corporeal worldly reality (36–37). González shows how Augustine’s appropriation of Platonism was influential in his pursuit of the knowledge of God and the soul, a theme and methodology that influenced Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (46–47).

Chapter 3 narrates Augustine’s life from his baptism to his work as a presbyter, co-bishop, and bishop in Hippo. He understands that as a baptized Christian his calling is to confess and bring forth this faith of the gospel to the world. During this period he has an urgent desire to live within a Christian community dedicated to meditation

and devotion. This chapter explains the unique vision of Augustine concerning the monastic life and how he practiced it. This type of Christian monasticism, as González points out, is the one that influenced Martin Luther and his community of Augustinian friars.

Chapter 3 explains also Augustine’s development concerning true Christian knowledge in light of his theory of “Illumination.” This is an important development in the area of epistemology, as González observes, for Christian theology and for Western thought until the thirteenth century.

Chapters 4 through 7 engage the reader in Augustine’s pastoral work in view of his cultural and theological contexts. Chapter 4 reflects on Augustine’s pastoral work influenced by the Manicheans before his baptism in Milan. González sheds light on how Manes’s syncretistic rendering of Manichaeism impacted Alexandria and the Roman colonies in North Africa. González summarizes how Augustine developed a Christian answer to Manichaeism concerning evil in the world. Augustine refuted the gnostic tendency of Manichaeism to reject the body and God’s earthly creation. It is during this period that Augustine affirms the unity of God as creator of the world, the unity of a person, and the unity between the Old and New Testaments. He becomes critical of the Neoplatonic outlook on nature. Above all, he develops a theological framework that rejects the threatening demands of Manes’ dualism.

Chapter 5, the most useful chapter in my opinion, shows how Augustine engages his cultural context and how his theology blooms and becomes influential

in the West. This chapter unfolds the mediating position followed by Augustine between Donatism and the orthodox catholic faith in light of his *mestizaje*. Still, González observes that Augustine never captures very clearly or completely the suffering and social injustice experienced by his people. In fact, Augustine contributed to the confusion between catholicity and uniformity that dominated the medieval church. This is also a point that, in my opinion, has limited the affirmation of a true catholicity, where the faith of the people is affirmed and understood. González has always been a champion in correcting this limited type of ecumenism where the specific communities of faith are neglected within the catholic expression of the church.

In chapters 6 and 7, González navigates through several of Augustine's works through the lenses of *mestizaje*. This exercise pinpoints the pastoral and theological acumen of the bishop from Hippo in confronting Pelagius and in developing a theology of history in light of the Roman Empire's debacle. We can appreciate here why he is considered the "doctor of grace" by Catholics and Protestants alike and how they differ in their appropriation of Augustine. Also we can discern how Augustine's theology of history influenced and limited the political outlook of the Western world and the church.

In his concluding chapter González explores how Augustine's vision enhanced and limited the theological perspective of Western Christianity. First, he kept alive for the church its intellectual heritage. Second, he provided pastors and church leaders at the beginning of the Middle Ages with intellectual and theological tools to direct the life of the church dur-

ing those uncertain times. He uplifted grace as an essential principle and foundation for a church that was becoming very legalistic. He provided a necessary hermeneutical principle to interpret the sacred texts, in particular St. Paul's epistles. He also explained why there should not be a contradiction between the languages of reason and grace.

Because Augustine was the predominant lens of his time, the church began to understand and construct her theology limited by his vision. This left out some important interpreters such as Basil, Irenaeus, and Athanasius. González pinpoints some of the limits of Augustine's theology of history. While Augustine gave people hope in difficult times, his division of secular and sacred history gave an upper hand to a somewhat Platonic churchly kingdom. This bifurcation, as González is keenly aware, has driven away or stifled the eagerness of Christians to act in light of God's justice and love in the present world.

This book may not deepen our understanding of how to appropriate Augustine in light of our twenty-first *mestizaje*; however, I believe that González's purpose is to show how Augustine lived and worked and theologized in light of his *mestizaje*. If we understand this point of departure, we will not only understand Augustine better but we will become more adept in interpreting other theologians in light of their cultural crossroads. We will also be able to be more reflective of our theological crossroads and the various cultures that intersect our *mestizaje*.

Alberto L. García
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A CHRISTIAN IN TOGA: Boethius—Interpreter of Antiquity and Christian Theologian. By Claudio Moreschini. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014. 155 pages. Hardcover. \$90.00.

Boethius was a key figure in the transition from the ancient world and patristic presentation of the Christian faith to later scholastic expressions of theology. A consul of the city of Rome and *magister officiorum*, as well as a leading intellectual, at the court of the Gothic emperor Theodoric, Boethius is most famous for his *Consolation of Philosophy*, composed in prison as he awaited execution at Theodoric's hand. Moreschini effectively argues that his oft-overlooked earlier works, both on the quadrivium, on logic, and particularly on several topics of Christian theology, reveal how the world of thought fostered by Neoplatonists, pagan and Christian, was being integrated into theology by leading Christian thinkers of the early sixth century, among whom Boethius's works have won him high standing.

Moreschini's careful reading of and detailed engagement with the interpretations of more than fifteen modern scholars, combined with briefer examination of many other students of Boethius's thought, lead readers into the sixth-century mind and milieu of this unique lay theologian in this volume. The book is essentially an extended bibliographical essay with clear guidance from the author as to how Boethius is to be understood. Moreschini cautions against imposing on the sixth century later evaluations of the relationship, even rivalry, of philosophy and theology, thus correcting and clarifying the claims of modern historians who

viewed the period through the lens of their own times.

The core of Moreschini's argument arises out of his judicious analysis of Boethius's use of Augustine in his earlier theological opuscula, which include a catechism and four other treatises addressing the heresies of Nestorius and Eutychus, Trinitarian doctrine, and the participation of the believer in God. Augustine and others in the Neoplatonic tradition, both Christian and non-Christian, shaped much of the framework of Boethius's thought. Moreschini traces in detail where and how the works of the bishop of Hippo, Marius Victorinus, John the Deacon, Macrobius, and others influenced Boethius.

Although Moreschini is convinced that Boethius preserved the biblical sense of the personal in his doctrine of God, the marks of a contrasting Neoplatonic way of conceiving of the "*summum bonum*"—note the neuter!—as an impersonal entity seem all too evident in this presentation of Boethius's works. To use H. Richard Niebuhr's classification, his "Christ" seems "of culture" and of a culture that at its root had no grasp of the personal nature of the emotional God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who became human as Jesus. Apologetics is a necessary part of the Christian witness to the world, and Christians inevitably translate the biblical message into the thought worlds of their own time and place. Moreschini's Boethius indeed tried that, but this study demonstrates how illusory that effort can be in view of the radical difference in fundamental presuppositions between the message of Scripture and, in this case, the Neoplatonic world of thought.

Robert Kolb

WHO IS THE CHURCH?: An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century. By Cheryl M. Peterson. Fortress Press, 2013. 176 pages. Paper. \$22.00.

Cheryl Peterson, professor of systematic theology at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, initially developed her ecclesiology that starts with the Spirit in her dissertation, and this book is a revision of and a development from that initial work.¹ Peterson's ecclesiology is part of the growing research in the church after Christendom, and is one of the best comprehensive accounts of the church for post-Christendom. Peterson appropriates insights from communion ecclesiology, the *missio Dei* movement, and the Lutheran tradition, particularly Luther's Large Catechism, in order to offer an account of the church's identity for this time after Christendom. As such, Peterson's book offers much for the Lutheran tradition and for the church during this awkward time of disestablishment and is worthy of attention.

The major ecclesiological problem, for Peterson, is that the narrative of Christian America has developed an anthropocentric ecclesiology based upon the voluntary principle.² The voluntary principle means two things: the church is a "voluntary association of believers" and such voluntary associations work together to promote the American project of a virtuous republic (24). This problem is deeply theological—the voluntary principle makes the church primarily about the *volunteers* instead of about God—and it is also deeply practical. Christendom is over, which means church can no longer be a "chaplain" to the nation. For theo-

logical and practical reasons, the church must think of its mission apart from the social vision of America (30–31). For Peterson, Christendom in America has produced not only a problem of the church's purpose, but more importantly Christendom has fostered a crisis of ecclesial identity. Who is the church if it no longer has any role in the American project? Peterson answers, "We are the church because of what *God* has decided and is doing for our redemption—and because of what *God* desires for the sake of *God's* mission in the world" (32, emphasis original). The church is a missionary church because it finds its identity and mission in God.

As Peterson defines the contours of a missional ecclesiology, she engages with three paradigms of ecclesiology: "word-event," communion, and *missio Dei* ecclesiology (93–95). The "word-event" ecclesiology, represented primarily by Gerhard Forde, reduces the church to the sermon, but is right to stress God's address to his church from the outside, which creates the church through the word of forgiveness.³ Communion ecclesiology, represented especially by Robert Jenson, asks primarily about the unity of the church rather than its identity and purpose.⁴ Nonetheless, communion ecclesiology rightly highlights that the church not only declares forgiveness, but it also makes Christ present to believers to share in the communion of the Triune God. This improves upon the word-event ecclesiology because of the concept of *koinonia* as the visible communion of the church. Both the word-event ecclesiology and communion ecclesiology, however, do not take "into account the post-Christendom context in the same way

as the missional paradigm” (94). Hence, the *missio Dei* model provides a starting point for Peterson by emphasizing the economic Trinity and the mission of God in the world. In the missional paradigm, the church is identified in terms of God’s work in his creation, and it is given a purpose to embody God’s mission (94).

Although Peterson is concerned about the church’s identity and purpose—categories that are sociological—she grounds the church on theology rather than sociology. In fact, she begins her ecclesiology with “the *ad extra* movement of God in the *missio Dei*” (99). From this perspective, Peterson argues that a narrative which “starts with the Spirit” identifies the church in a missional way, incorporating the important elements of the word-event and communion models. Peterson “contends that the church receives its *particular identity and purpose* through the Holy Spirit, which in the Acts narrative is promised by Jesus after his resurrection and received at Pentecost” (105).⁵ Hence, Peterson’s narrative ecclesiology “starts with the Spirit,” by looking at the book of Acts. The church is “Spirit-breathed,” given its “new identity and mission to forgive sins (Jn 20:22–23) and to be witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 1:8)” (106). In Pentecost, the Spirit gathers the people of God—now experienced universally throughout the nations and not just in Israel—and calls God’s people to be witnesses to Christ. Thus, the story of the church in Acts is a story of the Holy Spirit pushing the church into mission as witnesses to Christ, guiding the disciples to cross ethnic, religious, and social barriers in proclaiming the salvation of God, and drawing believers deeply into *koino-*

nia with God and each other. The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead gives new life to the church, creating, sustaining, and calling God’s church into mission (107–115).

For Peterson, this pneumatological foundation of the church is fully Trinitarian since “the work of the Spirit is centered in Christ.” The story of the Spirit is “the story of God’s mission in the world,” which finds its center in “the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ” (123). The Holy Spirit should not be known as a general Spirit of creation, but the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. This is an essential point in Peterson’s ecclesiology since it establishes the fully Trinitarian understanding of God’s story with its focal point in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

As Peterson looks at the Lutheran tradition, she finds an ally in Martin Luther’s Large Catechism. Following Reformation scholar Gottfried Krodel, Peterson argues that Luther’s interpretation of the Creed tells the narrative of God and places the individual within God’s story (123–24). In the third article, Peterson sees Luther telling a story of the Holy Spirit bringing people to faith at the same time they are drawn into church community. Faith and forgiveness of sins both happen within the church community even as the church hears this word from God (126). Moreover, Peterson understands Luther to extend the mission of the church to the world in the Large Catechism: the Holy Spirit speaks “*through* the holy community to extend God’s blessings to the world” (127, emphasis original).

Based on this, Peterson sees Luther developing a “story arc” with the Holy

Spirit and the people of God as two major characters, moving from the resurrection of Jesus Christ to Pentecost to the second coming of Christ. In the middle of the story, Luther understands the church's identity as given by the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit empowers the church for its purpose through the gospel. Thus, Peterson states, "the Holy Spirit gives the church its narrative identity as a Spirit-breathed people, in whom the Spirit breathes new life, life that is experienced not only existentially through the gift of faith but also through the lived-out reality of forgiveness of sins and transformed relationships." Furthermore, this community embodies the new life of the Spirit, by which it witnesses to the world (128).

As I stated at the outset, Peterson's ecclesiology is the best account of the church from the Lutheran tradition for post-Christendom that I have read thus far. She consistently understands the church in theological language and in a biblical framework without neglecting the life of the visible, concrete community. She centers the church on the Triune God, particularly the *ad extra* movement of the Spirit, which envisions the church as a concrete, visible community, called to live out Christ's forgiveness in the *koinonia* of the Spirit. As such, Peterson's perspective is extremely valuable for this time after Christendom. Her understanding of the church's mission as part of God's mission through Christ and the Spirit is a necessary biblical perspective, especially during this time when the church has lost its purpose and identity.⁶ Peterson rightly understands the church in terms of its visibility and concreteness, doing so without lapsing into idealistic

talk about "practices."⁷ Although I would quibble with Peterson on the pneumatological starting point instead of a christological one, Peterson's ecclesiology is on the mark and deserves to be read widely. I highly recommend this book.

Theodore J. Hopkins
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Endnotes

¹ See also Cheryl M. Peterson, "The Question of the Church in North American Lutheranism: Toward an Ecclesiology of the Third Article," (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2004).

² In her dissertation, Peterson identifies this as an issue but primarily targets the problem of Lutheran ecclesiology: Lutheran ecclesiology does not understand the church as a missional church. See Peterson, "The Question of the Church," 1–3.

³ For analysis of Forde, see Peterson, *Who is the Church?* 45–48 and 52–54; Peterson, "The Question of the Church," 139–60.

⁴ For analysis of Jenson, see Peterson, *Who is the Church?* 66–70 and 73–76; Peterson, "The Question of the Church," 161–99.

⁵ In Peterson's dissertation, this argument was merely formal; Peterson never told a story which identified the church. She merely asserted that the church exists in the narrative arc of the mission of God, starting with the Holy Spirit. Although I remain concerned that Peterson's story is too formal without a substantial Christology, this monograph has improved upon her dissertation in an important way.

⁶ For an account of how the church's mission has turned into partisan politics, which I see as a major problem, see James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: University Press, 2010).

⁷ For a critique of practices, see Nicholas M. Healy, "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5 (2003): 287–308.

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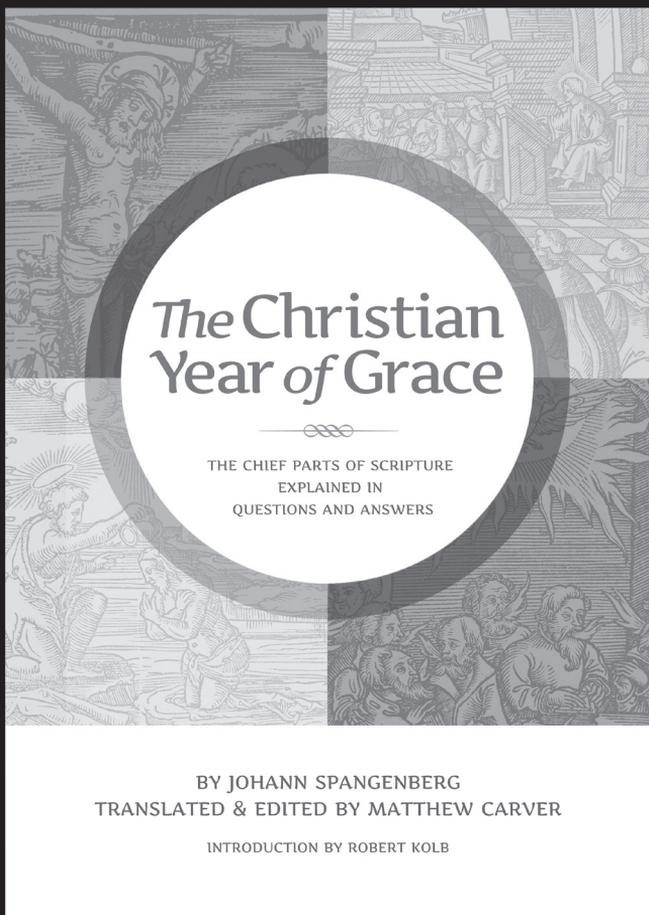
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