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# concordia journal



*On the cover: Built next to the original St. Louis campus of Concordia Seminary, Holy Cross Lutheran Church, in south city, was first pastored by C. F. W. Walther. Theodore Hopkins references the current ministry of Holy Cross in his article starting on page 29. Photo credit: Bridgette Sharp.*

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# *Editorials*



# Editor's Note

Well, the date Lutheran Christians have been waiting for has come—October 31—500 years after the outspoken professor-monk inked ninety-five numbered sentences on a sheet of paper that changed the world. Five hundred years and what can be said about Martin Luther that hasn't already been said? Still much, apparently, some of it new, some of it “fake news,” some of it said before but worth repeating.

*Concordia Journal* marked the quincentennial early in the year with a double-issue newly designed. Now that we are reaching the waning months of 2017, one might wonder what effect all the fuss will have beyond this year. Will non-Lutherans remember Martin Luther in 2018? Will the velocity of collective amnesia kick in the moment the New Year ball drops in Times Square? Whether we know it or not, we live in a post-Luther world, a world Luther made possible. Three somewhat random thoughts recently reminded me of that fact.

One: Martin Luther is perhaps the first figure in western history to visibly and publicly resist a political superpower (in his case, the papal authority in Rome) and not be executed for it. If we stop to think about it, the “Here I stand” moment at Worms was a rather astounding break in history. It should give us pause when we scroll through all the social-media hot takes on, for instance, who is kneeling or standing during the national anthem. For the greater part of human history, exercising what we now call the First Amendment would cost a person their life. Of course, depending on your postal address, it still does.

Two: of the three *solas* that became the slogan of the Reformation (grace, faith, scripture), Luther is at his most incisive when he speaks of *sola fide*, faith alone. To wit, President Meyer's sermon to open this new academic year (printed on the following pages), introducing the theme of “Faith . . . Living, Daring Confidence in God's Grace,” itself a bon mot directly from Luther. Luther's notion of faith as an emboldened and emboldening trust in the never-ending promise of God, a trust that at once liberates and empowers the human heart to a love never thought possible, is Luther at his most radical. And it is as compelling for life in 2017 as it was in 1517.

Three: Luther was purposefully an unsystematic theologian, a theologian who put his thinking to work through the occasion that prompted it. It made him one of the great inductive thinkers of European intellectual history. Which is enough to make one wonder what Luther himself would think of an occasion like a milestone anniversary. But it also sheds light on the inadvertently un-thematic nature of this issue of *Concordia Journal*. I leave it to others to guess what Luther might have

thought of the books written about him in this quincentennial year, a number of them reviewed in the concluding section of this issue. But all of them would have been impossible to write without him.

*Travis Scholl*  
*Managing Editor of Theological Publications*

# Faith . . . Living, Daring Confidence in God's Grace

Jesus asks two questions in today's Gospel lesson. First, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Then he narrows it down. "But who do you say that I am?" These two questions capture the essence of the mission before us. First, know the mission field. Second, know what you believe.

Every day Diane and I turn on TV and watch the news. Have you noticed how the news anchor almost always begins by saying, "We have breaking news"? Wouldn't it be great if the news anchor said, "No breaking news today; let's go straight to weather and sports"? But no, there's a barrage of breaking news and what's happening in our society is straining institutions including the church. Let's take Jesus's first question "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" You should all become familiar with this book, *Barna Trends 2017*. Beginning on page 178, the Barna organization summarizes "Five Popular Beliefs about Jesus." First, "the vast majority of Americans believe Jesus was a real person." Second, "Younger generations are increasingly less likely to believe Jesus was God." Here's some detail.

People are much less confident in the divinity of Jesus. Most adults believe Jesus was God (56%), while about one-quarter say he was only a religious or spiritual leader like Mohammed or the Buddha (26%). The remaining one in six say they aren't sure if Jesus was divine (18%). Millennials are the only generation among whom fewer than half believe Jesus was God (48%).

Third, "Americans are divided on whether Jesus was sinless" About half, 52 percent, of Americans say he committed sins and 56 percent of millennials believe Jesus committed sins. Fourth, "Most Americans say they have made a commitment to Jesus Christ." In light of doubts about his divinity and sinlessness, what does a commitment mean? And fifth, "People are conflicted between 'Jesus' and 'Good Deeds' as the way to heaven." "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Barna president David Kinnaman sums it up: "Americans dedication to Jesus is, in most cases, a mile wide and an inch deep."<sup>1</sup>

This deterioration in biblical faith is accelerated by omnipresent technology and communication. It's going to get worse. Says Ray Kurzweil of Google, "The twenty-

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## *Editor's note*

*President Meyer preached this sermon based on Matthew 16:13–20 for the opening service of Concordia Seminary's 179th year.*

first century will be equivalent to 20,000 years of progress at today's rate of progress."<sup>2</sup> Thomas Friedman, editorial writer for the *New York Times*, writes this in his new book, *Thank You for Being Late*: "The rate of technological change is now accelerating so fast that it has risen above the average rate at which most people can absorb all these changes. Many of us can't keep pace anymore. 'And this is causing us cultural angst' (Erik Teller)."<sup>3</sup> This barrage of change has venerable old businesses struggling in this new world of e-commerce. The government is dysfunctional at almost every level. And the institutional church is struggling. Mainline denominations are in decline. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is going down the toboggan slide too. Many parishioners look at their graying, shrinking congregation and see that their church isn't what it used to be. Peggy Noonan is a weekly columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*. She reflected on all the worrisome changes around us as she reread a book by Dean Acheson. He was the Secretary of State under President Harry Truman. Peggy Noonan wrote, "Everyone's in the dark looking for the switch." Isn't that a great description of our society today? "Everyone's in the dark looking for the switch," she wrote. "When you're in the middle of history the meaning of things is usually unclear . . . In real time most things are obscure." And then she quotes Dean Acheson, "'Only slowly did it dawn upon us that the whole world structure and order that we had inherited from the nineteenth century was gone.'"<sup>4</sup> So much that we have known has been blown up. No wonder you will sometimes hear people say that it's a bad time to be the church, a bad time to get into the ministry.

Wait! There's more breaking news! In John 8:4, Jesus proclaims, "I am the light of the world." And now another report is coming in, this from Isaiah chapter 60. "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you." With that good news, Jesus narrows it down from "Who do people say that the Son of Man is" to this, "But who do you say that I am?"

These changes that distress can prove to be a blessing in disguise. The reason I say that is because these changes give us an opportunity to learn anew, or to learn for the first time, the radical nature of faith in Jesus. Think back thirty, fifty, seventy years ago. America was, quote, "Christian" America. Most people went to church, or at least knew they should go to church. Whether they went or not is another question. Most people knew about the Bible and its main characters. Whether they took it as God's word is another question. Most people knew who Jesus was. Whether they truly believed in him or not is another question. And the morality of America thirty, fifty, seventy years ago was publicly based on the Ten Commandments, which were often displayed on government grounds and buildings. In that environment, the things of God and the things of public society easily became mixed together. Christian life and public life were homogenized, the clear differences blurred. In the America many of us grew up in, America that seemed Christian, the distinctiveness of following Jesus

could get lost. But now “Christian” America is gone. That makes this new time an opportunity, a strange blessing to understand anew, or understand for the first time, the radical nature of faith in Jesus.

In the Bible, faith has two aspects. One is internal, subjective, how we feel about something. This is the way most Americans understand faith, whatever’s in your heart. That’s why many people don’t care what you believe as long as you’re sincere. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” “Whatever!” The second aspect of faith in the Bible is something outside of us, not in us, something objective, not subjective, something we look to, something we focus on, something that shapes who we are and how we live life. What is that external focus of faith? The focus of faith is not our family, although family is a precious gift from God. The focus of faith is not Martin Luther, though God continues to bless us through Luther’s work. The focus of faith is not a more “Christian” America, which might be nice but, breaking news, we’re not going back to the 1950s. The focus of faith is Jesus Christ. “‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.’”

This is “light from above” for our dark world. “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). The great God has “saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim 1:9–10). Unlike the recent eclipse, this is light you can look into, light you want to look into. What a great time to be in the mission of our Lord Jesus! It’s not our church; it’s his. The future of the church is not on our shoulders; it’s on his cross, his resurrection, and his coming again to take you and me to heaven. Martin Luther says, “Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God’s grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith.”<sup>5</sup> “Everyone’s in the dark looking for the switch”? Not us; we have breaking good news. “In your light do we see light” (Ps 36:9). Faith . . . living, daring confidence in God’s grace.

“But who do you say that I am?” I close with a quotation that has made a profound impact upon my life and faith. Rev. Arnold Kuntz was president of the Pacific Southwest District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. In a devotion book, *Devotions for the Chronologically Gifted*, Dr. Kuntz wrote this. “Life narrows down, and crisis comes. Suddenly only one thing matters, and there, in the narrow place, stands Jesus.”<sup>6</sup> Amen.

Dale A. Meyer  
President

## **Endnotes**

- 1 Barna Group, *Barna Trends 2017* (Ada, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 178–179.
- 2 Thomas Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 187.
- 3 Ibid., 31.
- 4 *Wall Street Journal*, February 9, 2017.
- 5 Martin Luther, *Preface to the Romans*.
- 6 Les Bayer, ed., *Devotions for the Chronologically Gifted* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 46.

# *Articles*



# We Lost Each Other Too

## God, Persons, and Moral Status

James V. Bachman



James Bachman has served congregations in Florida, Indiana, California, and England. He is a professor emeritus of Concordia

University, Irvine. He and his wife now live in Colorado where they continue service to church and community.

Religion relates to common morality in complex ways. Christians, who celebrate their redemption in Christ Jesus, refuse to confuse our witness to Christ our Savior with urgent concerns about common morality. Christian theologians, past and present, have stressed that

common morality is indeed common to all thoughtful humans. In Romans 2:14, St. Paul commends to our attention people who lack biblical faith and yet “by nature do what the law requires.” In the early centuries of Christian thought, Augustine used a metaphor of the heavenly city and the earthly city to contrast those who live by faith with those who do not, but he argues, “The heavenly city has no hesitation about keeping in step with the civil law which governs matters pertaining to our existence here below. For, as mortal life is the same for all, there ought to be common cause between the two cities in what concerns our purely human living.”<sup>1</sup> In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas famously made common cause with pagan philosopher Aristotle in matters of morality.<sup>2</sup>

Closer to our home tradition, Luther commends the pagan Cicero for his teachings on natural morality.<sup>3</sup> Luther is so fond of Cicero that he writes, “I do hope God will help Cicero and such men as he to the remission of sins—and if he must

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### Editor's note

*This research was conducted during Professor Bachman's tenure as the Harry and Caroline Trembath Professor of Confessional Theology at Concordia University, Irvine.*

## *God's left-hand rule extends over all humans, whether they acknowledge God or not.*

remain out of grace, then he will at least be some levels higher than our cardinals, and the bishop of Mainz.”<sup>4</sup> In his inimitable way, however, Luther wrote that “you’ll find

among those who brag and boast about their natural reason and law there are a good many thorough and big natural idiots. For that noble jewel which is called natural law and reason is a rare thing among the children of men.”<sup>5</sup> And, in case we Christians might brag and boast, Luther writes that “to tell the truth, [the heathen] are far more skillful in such matters than the Christians.”<sup>6</sup> He also claims something that we will need to return to—that the gospel contributes nothing to our understanding of natural law.<sup>7</sup>

Two significant puzzles concern how common morality, this possession of all thoughtful people, relates to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. One question concerns the quarrel between some Lutherans and most other Christians over whether the common morality is reaching back toward the perfect order of the original creation, so that God’s grace in Christ can help us progress toward a perfecting of the common morality. This quarrel relates to the puzzle that common morality has not fared well in its treatment of questions concerning the moral status of various human populations, including slaves and women, nor has it been able to shed light on the moral status of nonhuman populations.

The question of “progress toward perfecting common morality” may remind Lutherans of the old Thomistic notion of “grace perfecting nature.” This reminder may well put us on guard whether common morality can be perfected. More controversially, I have been using the phrase “common morality” rather than “natural law” to speak of the morality that governs this fallen world. I may more easily be able to persuade you that “common morality” is a necessary but limited project of God’s left-hand rule not destined to hold sway in the perfected kingdom. To say the same about “natural law” may seem more troubling.

Mention of God’s left-hand rule requires a brief summary of Lutheran teaching about God’s two projects in our world. The Lutheran reformers urge us to distinguish carefully between what God’s word shows to be two different projects God is pursuing in our world. Of the two projects, the eternally significant one is centered on the reconciling life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The reformers called this God’s right-hand kingdom or rule, and they connected this project to the explicit life, ministry, and witness of the Christian church, the body of Christ. But, they said, God also pursues an interim project, a left-hand rule, that seeks to preserve all human beings in their encounters with each other, despite the anxious and hateful ways in which faithless humans sinfully harm each other. God’s left-hand rule extends over all humans, whether they acknowledge God or not. Even Christians living in the

body of Christ still struggle with their anxious and hateful ways, so God's left-hand rule applies to us as well.

The Lutheran reformers warned Christians against confusing these two projects. God's ways of preserving all humans in their encounters with each other differ greatly from his ways of bringing us to Christ. God's left-hand rule, they said, uses civil law and civil righteousness to keep a rough and ready peace between anxious and hateful humans in a fallen world, but the left-hand rule provides no path to reconciling fallen sinners to God and to each other. God's right-hand rule uses law only to convict us of our sin and to bring home our need for a Savior. The gospel of forgiveness, new life, and salvation in Jesus Christ brings us to God's righteousness, the righteousness of faith, the righteousness of a right relationship with God, brought about by God's free grace through faith. This righteousness of faith is the key to God's ultimate care for us sinners.

Discussion of "common morality" requires that we examine possible interactions between God's two ways of ruling. As noted before, down through the centuries, significant Christian thinkers have taught that the common morality that characterizes God's left-hand rule is a common project between believers and nonbelievers. Luther articulated a common Lutheran claim when he said that the gospel teaches nothing about God's left-hand rule. Nevertheless, the gospel may have a significant impact upon the way God's left-hand rule develops in the fallen world.

### ***Recent Emergence of the Concept of Common Morality***

My work in health ethics over the last twenty-five years has led to an interest in "common morality." In September 2003, the Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University devoted an issue of its journal to discussion of common ethics. The editors noted that:

One of the most exciting and important developments in recent ethical theory—especially bioethical theory—is the emergence of the concept of "common morality," some set of core moral principles and norms that normal humans are inclined, pre-theoretically, to endorse. Some of the most influential theories in bioethics have endorsed the notion, using it as the starting point of their systems.<sup>8</sup>

My first and continuing encounter with the concept of common morality came in my ongoing work with the seminal bioethics text, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* by Tom Beauchamp and Jim Childress first published in 1979. Now, thirty-eight years later, a seventh edition continues to be a widely studied work in the field. Friends and foes alike acknowledge the text to be a key reference point in the world of health ethics. This text provides a convenient version of "common morality" philosophy for us to examine.

Chapter 1 of *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* moves quickly to the section, "The

Common Morality as Universal Morality.” The authors’ concise statement of common morality follows:

There are core tenets in every acceptable particular morality that are not relative to cultures, groups, or individuals. All persons living a moral life know several rules that are usually binding: not to lie, not to steal others’ property, to keep promises, to respect the rights of others, and not to kill or cause harm to others.<sup>9</sup>

The authors proceed to elaborate on the moral norms, the moral character traits or virtues, and the moral ideals found in the common morality. Indeed, their famous four principles— autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice—are a complex working out of the implications of common morality. Their work deserves close study, but in this article we must forego further elaboration of common morality, except in regard to common morality’s inability to manage questions of moral status.

### ***A Biblical Perspective on Common Morality’s Limitations***

My thesis is that, while human engagement with common morality can and should be praised and pursued, the whole project is a project under God’s left-hand rule. As such, God has designed our engagement with morality to help preserve us in the midst of the chaos and death brought on by human sin. We should not think that God has designed common morality to be perfected into an ethic for his right-hand kingdom of the righteousness that lives by grace through faith.

The fundamental problem for common morality is that it must guide us while we yet are lost to God and to each other. The title of this article, “We Lost Each Other Too,” alludes to the hymn “In Adam We Have All Been One” by Martin Franzmann.<sup>10</sup> This hymn is currently found in eight hymnals including Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran.<sup>11</sup> Franzmann taught theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis until 1968; beginning in 1969, he served for several years as tutor at Westfield House, the Lutheran House of Studies in Cambridge, England. He played a significant role in my own formation, but you shouldn’t blame him for any mistakes I am now making!

A meditation on Genesis and the fall, the second stanza of the hymn depicts our guilty flight from God: “We fled Thee, and in losing Thee We lost our brother too; Each singly sought and claimed his own: Each man his brother slew.” Genesis uncompromisingly shows how our rebellion and sin send us fleeing from God and then how our flight from God leads to our losing each other too. (I found it surprisingly difficult to locate any visual images of the fall that express our loss of each other. In the typical image, Adam and Eve romantically cling to each other as they are driven from Eden.)

Common morality is a key tool used by God to preserve us in the aftermath of humanity’s fall from right relationship with him. When I argue that common morality

cannot be perfected for those in right relationship with God and each other, I am joining a number of theologians, many Lutheran, who argue that the right dividing of God's law and his gospel requires that we not confuse what God is doing in society generally (left-hand rule) and the new creation and life he is giving us in Christ.

For example, during the 1930s Lutheran pastor, theologian, and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to reject popular theological talk about abiding "orders of creation." In his historical context of the 1930s he saw theologians using talk about eternal "orders of creation" to justify highly questionable ways of setting forward personal and national agendas. He warned against finding biblical warrant for eternal orders of creation in the "very good" of the creation text. He sternly criticized the use of this concept for "the division of man into nations [Voelker], national struggles, war, class struggle, the exploitation of the weak by the strong, the cut-throat competition of economics."<sup>12</sup>

Bonhoeffer's preferred phrase was "orders of preservation."

All orders of our fallen world are God's orders of preservation that uphold and preserve us for Christ. They are not orders of creation but orders of preservation. They have no value in themselves; instead they find their end and meaning only through Christ. God's new action with humankind is to uphold and preserve humankind in its fallen world, in its fallen orders, for death—[but also] for the resurrection, for the new creation, for Christ.<sup>13</sup>

Over the years, biblical, theological study and reflection has alerted me to the limitations of common morality, but what I find fascinating now are secular reflections on perplexing limitations in common morality. These reflections connect with God's theological critique in his word, and they help us pinpoint both the strengths and the weaknesses of common morality.

### ***A Secular Account of Common Morality's Limitations***

Secular accounts of common morality locate its limitations in various ways. I was startled into the connections with biblical critique by the way in which Beauchamp and Childress have located the common morality's limitations in their sixth and seventh editions. The sixth edition of *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* introduced a completely new chapter 3, "Moral Status."

The chapter begins with a section entitled "The Problem of Moral Status," surveying many puzzles both past and present concerning which populations are covered by the common morality. History shows that "certain groups of human beings (e.g., racial groupings, tribes, or enemies in war) . . . have been regarded as having no moral rights (historically, slaves in many societies). Those with a lower moral status have fewer or weaker rights (historically, women, in many societies)."<sup>14</sup> Through most of history, "nonhuman animals have been treated as less than persons."<sup>15</sup>

We need to pause over use of the word “person.” We have just seen Beauchamp and Childress use the word, but a few pages later, they assert, “‘Person’ is itself too vague a category to resolve these problems of moral status. . . . Our goal is to be as precise as possible about what is and must be respected. Use of the vague language of ‘person’ tends to undercut this goal.”<sup>16</sup> In a footnote they mention a fact of Christian theology to which we must return later: “The language of ‘person’ has a long history in theology, especially in Christian theological efforts to explicate the three individualities of the Trinity.”<sup>17</sup> Secular ethicists do not follow up this clue to the significance of personhood for the problems of moral status, but Christians should.

Beauchamp and Childress survey several theories meant to help us think about moral status, but they are not optimistic that a definitive account can be given. At the conclusion of their survey in chapter 3 they observe that much work needs to be done. As things currently stand, “there is justified uncertainty in arguments about the moral status of embryos, fetuses, brain-damaged humans, and animals used in research.”<sup>18</sup>

They return to the problems at the end of chapter 10 under the heading of “Method and Moral Justification.” Their further reflections are somewhat confusing and perhaps even confused. On the one hand they assert that “the most defensible view, we suggest, is that the common morality does not now, and has never, included a provision of equal moral consideration for all individuals, whatever such a provision might entail,”<sup>19</sup> and they are confident that empirical study would show this to be the case. Then, they immediately assert that common morality theory “should remain open to the possibility that the common morality could and should include rules of equal moral consideration for groups such as women, people of every ethnicity, the great apes, and other parties now excluded.”<sup>20</sup>

We leave Beauchamp and Childress at this disquieting point and return to a biblical perspective on what may be going on. At a minimum, the perplexities that secular ethicists experience concerning moral status illuminate for Christians something that we have long puzzled over. Christians have been at the forefront of defending human life in the mother’s womb. Roman Catholics and Lutherans have often cast the moral issue as a common morality problem to be settled by the common commitment to the moral rule not to take innocent life. The consistent response from the other side has been to affirm commitment to the moral rule but to exempt life in the womb from protection by the rule.

Beauchamp and Childress believe that the common morality currently lacks resources to make progress on questions about moral status. They read the history of the debate on abortion as showing that common morality is powerless to make progress on questions of the moral status of the fetus. They also believe that other controversies concerning the equal moral standing of women or the relative moral standing of animals used in research remain inconclusive because of this limitation in the common morality.

We must get a better grasp of how God's word intersects with our common morality problems. I have come to think that the failure of common morality to be able to address moral status questions has deep roots in the limitations of how God preserves us under the left-hand rule. So I am setting aside, for now, the strategy taken by many Christians of arguing that what God has shown all humanity in the natural law or the common morality is sufficient, for example, to make the case against abortion or embryonic stem cell research.

### ***A Biblical Perspective on Moral Status in a Fallen World***

My encounters with secular perplexities concerning moral status have led me back to God's word, but in God's word we also encounter long-standing theological perplexities concerning moral status. I will not recount how slavery can be seen in both Old and New Testament settings, nor how the situation of women in biblical times differs from our own notions of what is right or wrong. All of us who are biblically literate are aware that there are challenging questions to be thought through.

A first step in coming to terms with challenges in God's word is to deploy the tools of rightly dividing law and gospel and of distinguishing God's two ways of ruling in the world. Biblical wisdom can shed light both on why fallen humans struggle with questions of human moral status and on how God is addressing our sins against disadvantaged populations, not through natural law and common morality, but through what St. Paul calls the mystery of Christ and the church (Eph 5:32).

Consider how God's word coordinates affirmations about our new life in Christ with the realities of our current sinful life in this world. For example, St. Paul teaches that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). And he teaches us that our new life includes "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5:21). Yet, without even breaking stride, St. Paul also instructs us on fairly typical first-century delineations of roles for men, women, children, slaves, and masters (Eph 5:22–6:9; cf. Col 3:18–25). Paul is not alone in this instruction; Peter provides similar instruction in 1 Peter 2:13–3:7.

The Lutheran distinction between God's two ways of ruling, including the insight that Christians are simultaneously new Adams in Christ and yet old Adam sinners in this life, provides a clue for our wrestling with contrasts between our new life in Christ and our current life still in a fallen world. Above, Bonhoeffer helpfully connected common morality with God's orders for preserving his fallen creatures in the midst of their fallen state. While the "old Adam and Eve" continue to cling to us in this life, God uses the coercion of morality and law to limit the ways we hate and hurt each other.

For example, households full of old Adam sinners have to be organized. Husbands and wives need moral reminders and, when necessary, complex laws to order their lives with each other. God cannot leave me free as father of my children only to relate to them in mutual submission, even if, in Christ, my children and I are ultimately

brothers and sisters in Christ. Because my children and I remain fallen creatures in a fallen world, God's orders of preservation must one way or another order how I function as a parent. Luther's reflections on the fourth commandment here are helpful. He reminds us first to respect God's institution of parenthood and other authorities. Do not first look at the sinfulness of those who hold offices of authority; look first at the office and respect the ways that God has provided to preserve us in the midst of this dying world. St. Paul affirms our new reality in Christ where we submit to one another in reverence for Christ, but he also speaks clearly and directly about structures for household life, even reviewing conventional Roman and Jewish lists of duties about wives submitting to husbands, and slaves obeying masters. In Romans 13, he instructs us about God's institution of government, even corrupt Roman government, for a dying world.

These institutions of God's orders of preservation are not for perfecting us but for preserving us because we keep fleeing God and thus keep losing each other too. Notice how well secular accounts of common morality track this account of how God

*Common morality proves itself powerless to restore us to each other.*

preserves us. Common morality brings home to a dying world what is needed for us to have tolerably decent lives in the midst of a dying world, but common morality proves itself powerless to restore us to each other.

Common morality presumes that fallen humans will need status differentiations—some will lead and some will follow, some will command submission and others will submit. Common morality rules organize these institutions tolerably well, but common morality is powerless to bring about a world in which people submit to one another out of reverence for Christ so that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female” (Gal 3:28).

Consequently, people steeped in biblical wisdom will not be surprised that institutions of hierarchy and asymmetrical submission are everywhere in daily life. It is instructive that Beauchamp and Childress do not even try to analyze why we need complex human resource regulations that seek to moderate the sinful effects of relations of power between employers and employees, supervisors and supervisees, or faculty and students.

But should the fallen world attempt to lessen the oppressive effects of the necessary orders of preservation, and if so, how? Paul and Peter calmly instruct slaves about their duties to their masters, but we live in a time when slave ownership is deeply immoral. And frankly, even if I sometimes speak of my work as a professor as “slave labor,” I consider the socioeconomic system under which we live to be far superior to that of first-century Rome. How does such progress happen?

We have already seen secular perplexity about whether and how common morality might help. We know that the world's great religions never progress to St.

Paul's "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." People are given their place in life as we know it and are invited to submit (Islam, Confucianism, Taoism) or perhaps to escape to a better state (Hinduism, Buddhism).

We must come back to what Paul calls the mystery of Christ and the church (Eph 5:32). Remarkably, in the midst of fairly routine teaching about wives and husbands, parents and children, slaves and masters, Paul is mainly preoccupied with the mystery of our relationship to Christ and to one another in the body of Christ. As he reflects on the Genesis account of the relationship between man and woman, Paul sees an analogy between faithful marital relationships and Christ's love for the church. Like the true husband of Genesis 2, Christ nourishes and loves the church "because we are members of his body" (Eph 5:30). For Paul, the Genesis 2 text that we routinely connect with marriage becomes much more profound, it becomes a text about Christ and the church. Yes, "this mystery is profound"!

Bonhoeffer follows St. Paul's lead. He reads Genesis 2 as prefiguring the mystery of Christ and the church, and he laments the church's "glorification of marriage." The church, not marriage, is the heir of the pre-fall loving relationship seen in Genesis 2. Bonhoeffer then asserts "that the most questionable of all the church's official functions may be precisely its role in officiating at marriage. Sexuality has torn the community of love completely to pieces, so that it has turned into an obsessive desire [*Sucht*] that affirms itself and denies the other as God's creature."<sup>21</sup>

It is almost incomprehensible that we have so fallen from the life and being God gave us that we can *use* words, but we cannot easily find the *reality* of the words. Take, for example, the biblical doctrine of the Holy Trinity. In our flight from God we can only conceive of our individual personal existence as tied directly to our individual being. Consequently, when God's word speaks of the glorious being of the one God in the eternal loving relationship of the three persons, we quickly say that one God in three persons is incomprehensible. Nothing in our broken relationships helps us see how one being is constituted by the loving relationships of the three persons.

We hear in Genesis that we are created in God's image, but we rarely connect that with the Holy Trinity. Instead, we look for attributes of our individualized being that might match God's attributes. God has knowledge; we have knowledge. God rules over creation; we rule over creation. God has freedom; we have freedom. But all this talk simply betrays that we haven't pondered God's being and its significance for our own. And, of course, how could we? Busily we flee God as we make ourselves gods unto ourselves, so when would we stop and listen to the Holy Trinity?

Bonhoeffer tells us that the old Lutheran theologians—Gerhard, Quenstedt, and Calov—all "spoke of the indwelling of the Trinity in Adam."<sup>22</sup> My own appreciation of the Trinity's "being in relation" has come by way of Eastern Orthodox theology. If we are truly made in God's image then we are made for relationship. Our very being arises from our essential relationship with God and with each other. Genesis 1:26–27 is immensely rich:

*Our very being arises  
from our essential  
relationship with God  
and with each other.*

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over

every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Notice how perfectly these few lines match with the detailed telling in Genesis 2 in which we first hear only of Adam, but in verse 18 we read “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’” We humans, made in God’s image need each other as well as God so that we may be who we truly are. And the animals are not the other we need. In Genesis 1 we are given dominion; in Genesis 2 Adam surveys the rest of creation and finds no helper fit for him.

Bonhoeffer claims that we cannot understand what God has done in the original creation except in the light of Christ. Here he comes directly to St. Paul’s understanding of the creation narratives. Yes, Genesis 2 is about men and women and husbands and wives, but above all, “this mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:32).

The biblical critique of our sin is clear and direct—we flee from God and in fleeing God we lose each other too. No wonder common morality has not been able to restore us to each other. Until we are restored to God through the reconciliation that is in Christ Jesus, we live out the loss of each other in countless ways. Significantly, Beauchamp and Childress review five philosophical theories about moral status, and the last explores how our moral status is a function of our relationships. But because, in secular morality, they cannot effectively speak of the mystery of Christ and the church, they find that, as a philosophical theory, relationship is the least promising avenue to pursue.<sup>23</sup>

But now we come to something that we Lutherans risk missing, precisely because we don’t want to confuse morality with our reconciliation in Christ. We are accustomed to say, as Luther did, that the gospel witness to Jesus Christ teaches nothing about natural law and common morality.<sup>24</sup> We are right to say this to anyone who thinks that the perfecting of natural law and common morality are the key to our salvation.

But, if we delve deeply into the profound mystery of Christ and the church, we can expect that what Christ is making of us in the church can have effects on society at large. Paul and Peter patiently taught the common morality of the day, but in their



*Andrei Rublev's famous 15th-century icon of the Trinity (Credit: Wikimedia Commons).*

witness to our new life in Christ they help let loose in the world powerful hints of who humans can be in right relation with God. C. F. W. Walther rightly warned the Missouri Synod in his day not to misuse the Bible in common morality debates about slavery, but when the church lives out our submission to one another in reverence for Christ, a hint of who we truly are in the image of God is let loose in the world. When

we in the church strain toward a fellowship in which “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female” (Gal 3:28), we let loose in the world a witness that cannot live with slavery and oppression of others.

We should probe why secular morality seems to make little progress on handling moral status questions, while, at the same time, we see humanity making progress, if only haltingly, toward expanding the range of equal regard for all human persons. The mystery of Christ and church has been and continues to be salt and light to the world.

### ***Practical Implications for Current Moral Status Controversies***

The upshot, I think, is that, in the light of Christ, we can reshape how we enter into contemporary debates about moral status. Take, for example, the abortion debate. We have noted that opponents of life in the womb do not disagree about “do not kill or harm.” They only disagree about who should be in the circle of protected moral status. Because we know that humans are created in God’s image to find our being in being for one another, we can shift from the usual questions about who should or shouldn’t be protected by common morality. We can ask what it is about us that we are unwilling to welcome new lives into our world. Why, so often, do we see others as a burden and even a hell, rather than as partners in our lives? More than twenty-five years ago, Jean Garton, a vigorous prolife advocate in the LCMS, reshaped my arguments on abortion with the simple question, “Why wouldn’t we want to do everything we can to bring these new lives to baptism and life together with us in Christ?”<sup>25</sup> Why indeed!

God’s word tells us the awful answer. “We lost thee, and in losing thee we lost each other too.” Yet, we have experienced the rest of the hymn. “But Thy strong love, it sought us still and sent Thine only Son That we might hear His Shepherd’s voice and, hearing Him, be one.”<sup>26</sup> So, at the very least we can raise questions about humans welcoming, rather than fleeing from, each other.

Considering quandaries about use of human embryos in clinics and in research, I think Christians are at their best when they shift the debate from common morality stalemates over whether protectable life begins at conception. We would do better to keep raising questions concerning whether our technological manipulation of embryos is an appropriate way for humans to relate to that which we are. Oliver O’Donovan addressed the problem at the dawn of in vitro fertilization in 1984. He complained that the technology presents to us, in the fertilized egg, “ambiguously human . . . members of our own species who are doubtfully proper objects of compassion and love.”<sup>27</sup> If we find our being in being for each other, we should be skeptical of clinical and research technologies that confirm us in standing over and against each other, especially against vulnerable others.

Our biblical perspective can also shed light on another moral status question. A number of secular ethicists profess to find no reason to accord humans any higher moral status than the status we should accord to the rest of the higher animals. The

biblical affirmation of the unique way in which humans are made in God's image and the affirmation of our call to rule over creation make plain to us that our relationship to the animal world differs profoundly from our relationship to each other. Again, we are limited in bringing to bear our biblical faith on contemporary secular philosophical arguments, but still we are in a position to raise questions in the light of our faith. We can join our voices with those secular ethicists who sense a profound difference between humans and the animal world.

## Conclusions

Christians rightly make common cause with non-Christians on common morality and law.

Common morality and law help preserve us in a fallen world, but they do not restore us to God, and they do not restore us to each other. They do not represent the perfect order of the original creation.

The mystery of Christ and the church restores us to each other. That mystery bears fruit not only in the lives of Christians, but also in societies where the good news of the gospel is proclaimed.

While making common cause in common morality, Christians can add unique accents to contemporary ethics, especially where the topics touch on moral status questions and the relationships in which human persons can be for each other.

## Endnotes

- 1 Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.17.
- 2 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Books I–II, Question 94, Articles 2–6.
- 3 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition* 13:198–201 on Psalm 101. (Hereafter *LW*.)
- 4 Luther, quoted in Martin Marty, "Luther's Reckless Grasp of Grace," in *Christian Century* (October 26, 1983): 962–965.
- 5 Luther, quoted in E. Gordon Rupp, "Luther and Government," in *The Righteousness of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), 297–303.
- 6 *LW*, 13:198 on Psalm 101.
- 7 *Ibid*.
- 8 Kennedy Institute of Ethics, Special Edition Journal, [http://kiej.georgetown.edu/special\\_issues.html](http://kiej.georgetown.edu/special_issues.html) [Accessed January 2013].
- 9 Tom L. Beauchamp, and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 7th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.
- 10 Martin Franzmann, "In Adam We Have All Been One," *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 569.
- 11 [http://www.hymnary.org/person/Franzmann\\_MH](http://www.hymnary.org/person/Franzmann_MH) (accessed January 2013).
- 12 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, vol.3 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, trans. Douglas S. Bax, ed. Martin Rueter and Ilse Toedt, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1977), 139, Kindle.
- 13 *Ibid*, 129.
- 14 Beauchamp, 63.
- 15 *Ibid*.
- 16 Beauchamp, 67–68.

- 17 Ibid., 96, fn 15.
- 18 Ibid., 94.
- 19 Ibid., 434.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Bonhoeffer, 95.
- 22 Ibid., 59.
- 23 Beauchamp, 76–79.
- 24 *LW*, 13:198 on Psalm 101.
- 25 Some have used a similar logic to argue that Christian couples should not use contraceptives in family planning. I don't agree. In 1996 the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations published a report entitled *Christians and Procreative Choices*. In that report the Commission favorably quoted the 1981 Report on *Human Sexuality*: "In view of the Biblical command and the blessing to 'be fruitful and multiply,' it is to be expected that marriage will not ordinarily be voluntarily childless. But, in the absence of Scriptural prohibition, there need be no objection to contraception within a marital union which is, as a whole, fruitful" (1996, p. 25).
- 26 Franzmann, LSB 569.
- 27 Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 65.

# Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom

## How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations

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**H**is concern for the church was palpable. I could hear it in his voice and see it in his posture as he voiced trepidation about the church's relationship with the world: "Why don't they listen to us anymore?" I was leading a Bible study on the church, and such a study seems to elicit strong emotions. I had been speaking

of the church in biblical terms as the body of Christ, the community called to Christ's mission in its local community, but the questioner wasn't buying this vision of the church's identity and purpose. To be fair, he wasn't questioning the Bible's vision of the church, but he was concerned about the church's effectiveness. Christ might call the church, but it has little impact on society any longer, he suggested.

This exchange illustrates how deeply concerns for the church have penetrated into the lives of Christians. As churches have begun shifting to the margins of society and are now at the "awkwardly intermediate stage of having once been culturally established but . . . not yet clearly disestablished,"<sup>1</sup> Christians have begun to notice that their vocabulary has become foreign and their worldview strange. Some Christians have even claimed to be persecuted because of this disestablishment. Michael Knippa rightly argues that the recent change of the church's social location is not persecution but "loss of predominance," but that raises more questions than answers.<sup>2</sup> What does the loss of predominance look like "on the ground"? How does the awkward position between establishment and disestablishment affect the church's witness? How should the church relate to the world here and now?

Three aspects of the church in post-Christendom North America are particularly important today: the problems of identity, instrumentality, and purpose.<sup>3</sup> Because of

*Christians have begun to notice that their vocabulary has become foreign and their worldview strange.*

these problems, the church needs three corresponding emphases: storied identity, doctrinal substance, and visible concreteness. We will look at these three concepts to understand how congregations can faithfully

witness to Christ during this awkward time at the dusk of Christendom. Although post-Christendom society implicitly narrates the church within a therapeutic outline, the story of Christ identifies the church as a participant in Christ's mission, called to service and repentance in him. The article will conclude with concrete suggestions for being church in North America today.

#### ***Ecclesial Crises in Post-Christendom<sup>4</sup>***

Post-Christendom is characterized theologically by a deep apprehension about the relationship between the church and the world.<sup>5</sup> This apprehension, in part, stems from the changing relationship between church and society. In the past, in Christendom, the church-world relationship was largely set. Even in North America where the relationship of church and society was not legally determined, church and state were intertwined in such a way that the church-world relationship was assumed. In the analysis of Douglas John Hall, the church-world relationship had been culturally built-in, part of the North American imagination, part of the "inherited system of meaning."<sup>6</sup> Despite the legal separation of church and state, the American church operated with a basic understanding of the relationship between the church and the world defined by American Christendom. With Christendom dissolving, the presumed relationship is dissolving as well. As the average American becomes "more secular," attends church less often, and is more likely to not list a religious preference, the church's relationship to society has become a pressing question.<sup>7</sup>

Although the post-Christian milieu is multi-faceted, three issues are of particular importance for the church: the problems of identity, instrumentality, and purpose. To be clear, these are *ecclesial* problems, particular challenges for the church seeking to be faithful to Jesus and the story of God in this age, not simply the fault of society. Sometimes, it may be necessary to distinguish the church's practices or story from the world's, but a church versus world mentality will never be faithful to Jesus. Instead, these three problems will lead us to see how to be a more faithful church *in* this milieu, *with* these people, and *for* God's world.

Although the erosion of ethnic identity is related, the problem of identity stems from the logic of the marketplace, as sociologist Robert Wuthnow has shown in his studies of religious pluralism.<sup>8</sup> Wuthnow found that religious diversity is having a "powerful effect" upon congregations largely because congregations are following

“certain cultural scripts about how to be the church.” These cultural scripts follow the story of the marketplace, emphasizing individuality, autonomous choice, and superficiality. Since American religious “pluralism means that there are always competitors waiting to absorb members who may become disgruntled,”<sup>9</sup> Christian pastors, wary of going into too much depth and losing their hold on the religious market, treat other religions like “an ethnic custom.”<sup>10</sup> In so doing, Christian pastors are supporting the idea that Christianity too should be understood as an ethnic custom, a nice choice for some Americans. In this context, the church’s very identity is problematized.<sup>11</sup> Many are left wondering: Is the church anything more than a collection of like-minded individuals? Is the church only those who voice cognitive agreement with specific beliefs or practical agreement on political acts?<sup>12</sup> When the church is defined in these ways, the church’s identity—even if not beliefs—is removed from God and his saving work. The church is understood in the same way as a gathering of pro-life advocates or Christian socialists.

Compounding the problem of identity is the problem of instrumentality. As part of the sphere of personal values, the church has been narrated in a different story: a therapeutic story of personal self-fulfillment. Sociologist Eva Illouz has shown how therapy dominates Western lives by shaping the way we speak: “The therapeutic discourse offers an entirely new cultural matrix—made of metaphors, binary oppositions, narrative schemas, explanatory frameworks—that throughout the twentieth century has increasingly shaped our understanding of the self and of others.”<sup>13</sup> The therapeutic framework offers a new story, a story of an individual overcoming evil or tragedy in order to find self-fulfillment.<sup>14</sup> Christian Smith has shown how the therapeutic logic and language have overcome Christian imaginations in North America, particularly among teenagers.<sup>15</sup> Since religion for North American teens is just another instantiation of therapy, combined with rules—Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is Smith’s term for it—“religion is taken as a part of the furniture of [teens’] lives, not a big deal, just taken for granted as fine the way it is.”<sup>16</sup> For these teens who largely self-identify *as Christians*, the church is fine but unimportant. Church and religion may help someone here or there, but it is not a matter of ultimate concern. The church, then, is made an instrument of therapy’s highest good, the individual self and one’s personal goals for happiness. The church is a tool for personal and spiritual health and well-being.<sup>17</sup> This is the problem of instrumentality.

And then there is the problem of purpose that stems from the church having lost its privileged place in society.<sup>18</sup> During the time of Christendom, churches often understood their purpose as territorial expansion, gaining ground for Christ and democracy, as it was crudely put during the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> The Christendom model of the church’s purpose, then, revolved around power and politics, influencing the world from a position of strength. James Davison Hunter documents how both the Christian right and the Christian left try to change the world through partisan politics.<sup>20</sup> The church tries to enter the political sphere not as an

actor in its own right, but as an influencer of public policy through voting, lobbying, and other indirect political action. Even as the visibility of religion in the public sphere has grown, religious people are entering into the public sphere in ways shaped by the macropolitics of the state.<sup>21</sup> As the Christendom model is breaking down and the church cannot function as a moral compass for the state, the problem of purpose has arisen. Many churches are recognizing the need to speak and act publicly, but Christian imaginations have been captured by the frameworks of state politics and the marketplace, as we have seen. That we have made the church narrow and small as a Christian lobbying alliance is the problem of purpose.<sup>22</sup>

### **Contours of the Church in Post-Christendom**

How should these three problems of identity, instrumentality, and purpose affect how we understand the church and its mission today? Three criteria for ecclesiology are necessary: storied identity, doctrinal substance, and visible concreteness.

#### **Storied Identity**

In post-Christendom, the identity of the church has come under question. Who are we if nothing more binds us together than the individual's choice to go here? Biblically speaking, however, the church is a mystery, grounded in the work of the Triune God, part of God's eternal purpose and saving mystery in Christ and through the Spirit.<sup>23</sup> The church is first about God, who graciously includes us in his mission. To cultivate biblical identity in God, the church must be described with a narrative shape, rooted in the Lord Jesus instead of the implicit narrative of the religious industry within American capitalism. The narrative of Christ, then, is not merely a story of a religious community. In fact, a narrative ecclesiology that is primarily concerned with "the story of the church" can lead to an unhelpful introspection as if the church were the center of its own story. Instead, the church is given its story. Hence, the story of Jesus which identifies the church cannot be constructed by the church, even though it is always interpreted from this side. Rather, the church lives in the story of God and receives its place as part of God's story. This is an implication of the doctrine of justification. The church's identity is not created by the church but received from God.<sup>24</sup> In this way, the storied identity of the church also provides an important orientation for the church: the church looks always to the Lord not to itself since it receives its narrative identity (and its purpose) as a gift.

#### **Doctrinal Substance**

The problem of instrumentality necessitates that the church is rooted in substantial doctrines of the Christian faith. Although many in the post-Christian context are tempted to simplify the Christian faith as much as possible for those who do not know the Bible, the therapeutic context makes this difficult. If the basic content of the Christian faith is not made clear, it is easy to turn Christianity into another

## *The church's identity is not created by the church but received from God.*

therapeutic instrument, a mere option for self-fulfillment. In light of the therapeutic context where words like God, sin, evil, forgiveness, and love are ciphers for a completely different story

and logic, we must articulate the story and doctrines of the Christian faith clearly and fully so that the gospel *of Jesus* is heard and imagined as the story of the world. While the clear articulation of basic doctrines of the faith applies to theology broadly, it is particularly important for ecclesiology. In order to place the church within God's story—not the story of therapy—the church's identity and mission must be connected to the Triune God who reveals himself in the Scriptures. In this way, the church will be understood not in a therapeutic context but in terms of the story of the Bible and the doctrines of the faith.

### **Visible Concreteness**

The problem of purpose—with support from the other two crises—implies the criterion of visible concreteness. Against the temptation toward partisan politics, a post-Christendom ecclesiology must emphasize the visible, tangible community as a focal point of ecclesiology with a new and different kind of public life, a life of repentance and service, not triumphalist egocentrism. Ecclesiology must be able to show what being a Christian entails so that a congregation is not merely a piece of furniture in someone's life but a vibrant community that lives the Christian faith together. In other words, the problem today is a disconnect between identity and mission, faith and life. What is the church *for*? This is asked fervently today, and a concrete answer must be given. After all, God is at work in the community called church, and he calls us to live as the church not only in worship but every day as a community that proclaims the Lordship of Jesus Christ in service to God's world. Thus, ecclesiology must describe not only the church's identity given in faith, but also the life of faith that is lived in community. This work of the church cannot remain vague and abstract but must be practically oriented so that the church's purpose is articulated with concreteness for this time and place.

### ***A Christological Ecclesiology at the Dusk of Christendom***

To answer the question, "What is the church for?" we have to return to the question of the church's identity in God's story, particularly in Jesus Christ. By centering the church on Jesus, the church is identified as servant and brother of the Lord, brought into his story and called to his mission.<sup>25</sup> In relationship to Jesus, the church is made a participant in God's story and mission in the world. The two stories of Jesus—Christ the Lord and Christ the servant—are central narratives for the church today. These are not esoteric stories; they are self-involving narratives that bring the church

into the work of God and lead it into faithful witness.

Although there is only one person of Jesus, the stories of Christ the Lord and Christ the servant are two distinct stories of who Jesus is and how he saves, and they shape ecclesial identity and purpose in particular ways. The story of Christ the Lord identifies the church as servant of Jesus, given life through him and continually called to repentance and obedient discipleship. In light of Christ the Lord, the church takes a disposition of repentance and faith, as the distinct community that recognizes its sin and trusts in Jesus's forgiveness. The story of Christ the servant identifies the church as brother of Jesus, called to his ministry of service from below, entering into life with the outcast and the outsider with the gospel. In this light, the church is in solidarity with the world, called to be in, with, and for God's world. Because the church-world relationship is both one of distinction and one of interconnection and solidarity, both stories of Jesus are necessary to keep the church and the world in proper relationship. The two stories of Christ the Lord and Christ the servant are complementary, together helping the church navigate the complexities of the post-Christian age.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout Luke's Gospel (and Acts), Jesus is depicted as the Lord.<sup>27</sup> At Genesereth's shore, Jesus evoked repentance from Simon who glimpsed his identity as the Lord—"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinner"—and the Lord called him to be a fisher of people. Throughout the Gospel, the Lord Jesus creates a new community of disciples through repentance and forgiveness, giving them a new identity and putting them on mission to preach the reign of God, heal the sick, and invite all into his fellowship. The disciples are regularly chastised, called to repent and orient themselves to Christ, casting off their desires for self-sufficiency and power. In this way, the Lord Jesus forms the identity of his people over against any other lord that would capture their hearts and minds. As part of this, the Lord Jesus demands that his disciples follow him holding fast to his word, even into death. The story of Jesus the Lord is, then, a story of the Lord who creates a new community and calls it to follow him in obedience and mission.<sup>28</sup>

This brief story of the Lord begins to suggest just what the story of the Lord entails for congregations. For one thing, other lords are always trying to capture hearts and desires, just as they were for the disciples, taking eyes and ears away from Jesus. Perhaps, a congregation looks like any other community, failing to witness to the world since bourgeois identity has overshadowed its identity in Christ. Or, a congregation may be accusing the culture of so many evils that it has stopped seeing what God is doing in the world. Or, the congregation may be ignoring the poor and the needy because of an obsession with wealth and status. In these situations, this story speaks volumes as Jesus calls the church to himself, looking always, to him, the Lord. In this story, the Scriptures call the church to repentance and renewed obedience in witness and service, embodying Christian identity in the world. This repentance is demanded by the Lord Jesus himself. As he is present in the church as the risen one, Jesus is no static power, but he is the living Lord who creates his church

and kills it, continually calling his church to faithfulness. The story of Lord Jesus is lived out as the church, trusts in, obeys, and follows the Lord in mission.

At the same time, Jesus's lordship cannot be divorced from the way in which Jesus is Lord as a servant. Jesus rejects all ways of violence and coercion by force. He invites his followers to live differently from the Gentiles, not being served from a position of power but serving one another just as Christ served them. Accordingly, in John's Gospel, Jesus—as the supreme servant—washes his disciples' feet and gives them an example of loving one another. Most importantly, Jesus gives himself to die at the hands of the chief priests, scribes, and governing authorities in order that he might "give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). Jesus serves unto death on a cross.<sup>29</sup>

All of this is part of the humiliation of Jesus as he took the form of a servant to save his creatures, and Jesus's service continues now in the church. It is not merely that the church is to imitate Jesus in service—although this is not insignificant—but that Jesus remains the humiliated one even in his exaltation. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes, "Even through the empty grave, Jesus remains incognito, in the form of a stumbling block. Jesus does not emerge from his incognito, not even as the Risen One. He will not lay it aside until he comes again, for the Last Judgment."<sup>30</sup> Even after the resurrection, when Christ has been adorned in the spiritual body of the new age, he remains the humiliated one. He does not yet come with trumpets blaring and lightning flashing but humbly in his church. The power of God will not be wielded in glory and power, swords and scepters but in the words and service of a community of former fishermen, zealots, and tax collectors. The weakness of the cross continues in this church. Jesus not only calls his church to his mission but to do it his way, the way of service for the world in obedience to God. Hence, Jesus authorizes the church to work in the mundane ways of the cross: the sacraments, preaching, praying, confession and absolution, and the service of Christian community. The risen Christ comes to his church and is fully present in water and words, bread and wine, yet the ways of Jesus reveal his lordship not in power but in weakness, the way of the cross.

These two narratives of Christ the Lord and Christ the servant connect the church directly to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ creates the church, giving up his life that his dying people could have life, and he continues to work through church communities in order to bring the gospel to the world. The church finds its identity here as a gift from the Lord Jesus who is present as the risen Lord in the church and for the church. At the same time, the Lord Jesus is also outside of the church, not reducible to the church, and Jesus is speaking to his church through the Scriptures to call to repentance, obedient discipleship, and renewed mission. These two stories are not mere stories; in them Jesus identifies the church in him and calls his people to faithfulness in mission.

### ***What Does This Mean? Making It Concrete***

This Christological ecclesiology, describing the stories of Christ the Lord and Christ

the servant, connects the church to Christ, providing resources for the church facing the challenges of post-Christendom. How do we make this abstraction concrete?

First, we (pastors, teachers, and Christian leaders) must go back to the basics and teach and proclaim the identity and mission of God without skipping too quickly to personal application. The church is only the church because Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus is prior to the church and prior to each Christian. Going back to the basics, then, means going back to the Bible, seeing how the Bible is a story *first about God*, who brings us into his life and story. When we gloss over who

## *The church is only the church because Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.*

God is and what he has done—when we gloss over the stories and language of the Bible—we risk not offering a vision of God and his work that can overcome the therapeutic and market language and logic,

which are ingrained in Western people. In Lutheran theology, we often do this subtly by stressing the process by which the individual is converted over the identity of God. In so doing, we put the cart before the horse, placing how someone is saved before the identity of the God who saves.<sup>31</sup> This happens both among conservatives who focus on law and gospel and the missional folks who tend to focus on personal application. Too often both fail to talk first and primarily about God.

I suspect that we start from a more familiar place, the individual and what God can do for us, because God is an option for us in our secular age; that is, we can imagine the world without God.<sup>32</sup> This is not a good way forward, no matter how intuitive it may seem. The prevailing metaphysics of the West is therapeutic, which uses Christian language but contextualizes it differently. Talk about the *self* is the native tongue of North Americans, and such language has little hope of offering a new world or a new way of being. In this contemporary world, Graham Ward rightly argues that we need “not less metaphysics, but more and better metaphysics.”<sup>33</sup> Half the problem is that we—Christians, pastors, theologians—simply do not know God ourselves. There is plenty of belief, but we know ourselves and our psychology better than we know God. We talk about the self because that is the world we know. The Bible, on the other hand, is nearly devoid of psychological language; it is full of God. The Bible is just as strange a world today as it was when Karl Barth discovered it so one hundred years ago. The task of theology is not to describe the world of the self, but the world of God, and trust that God will narrate us, give us ourselves back when we are found in him.

After all, metaphysics entails life, and identity entails mission. Thus, theology too entails practice, and theology and ministry cannot be divided because life is already included in ontological and theological description.<sup>34</sup> As Stanley Hauerwas claims, “You can only act in the world you can see, and you can only come to see what you

can say.”<sup>35</sup> Theology *speaks* about God and God’s world, which in turn helps us to see the world in biblical language, and such seeing always entails life and practice. Of course, this theology has to be understandable and imaginable—even “speakable”—but it also has to be faithful to the Scriptures and connected to the Christian tradition. Many practical questions are thus theological because they concern how to see the world and how to act faithfully in it.<sup>36</sup> We must return to the basic stories of the Scriptures to imagine again the true story and ontology of the world. By returning to these basics, we will see the world more clearly and live in it more faithfully because the story of God is deeply personal, deeply relational, and deeply world-engaging. Theology entails life: we must go back to the basics, then, to listen to God speak in the Bible, even in ecclesiology and mission.

Second, the story of the Lord Jesus shows how the church is *confronted* by the word of the Lord and renewed through the gospel as the community of Christ. We must listen for God to show us where we have fallen short in our faithfulness to Jesus Christ not only as individuals but also as a community. Repentance is a communal reality as well as an individual one. We are created as a community through the Holy Spirit, and we act as a community in worship, service events, outreach, and Bible studies. As such, we must hear Christ’s word of rebuke *as a community*, turn away from unfaithfulness, trust in the gospel, and bear fruits of repentance. Specifically, we must confess our attitude of superiority to the world. Conservative Christians far too often think of themselves as having all the answers, and place confidence in these right answers as much as in God himself. We are worse than Balaam, so convinced we are in the right that we have shut our eyes from seeing God’s messenger and stuck our fingers in our ears so that we won’t hear the donkey. Only when we have repented of our self-confidence will we be able to hear God giving us our identity back in the gospel and calling us to faithfulness most importantly through the Bible but also through God’s world.

Third, Christian congregations must see themselves as eminently local, called by Christ to this community. Just as Christ entered into the fullness of human life in his humiliation and served his creatures, congregations must become local, looking to faithfully serve their neighborhood. The philosopher and theologian James K. A. Smith suggests that the old model of parish ministry embodied a notion of place that could be a helpful step in recovering local concrete ministry.<sup>37</sup> Eric Jacobsen also argues, “Parish thinking in a very general sense has to do with accepting geography as a significant factor in faithfulness to God’s call on our lives.”<sup>38</sup> This kind of parish model is not about drawing lines for membership; it’s about identifying the role geography plays in Christian faithfulness, helping a congregation see this specific locale as the place where Christ calls it to witness and service. As such, the people of the congregation need to spend time in the neighborhoods, getting first-hand knowledge of the people and places and seeing where God is calling them to his mission.<sup>39</sup> This is not the knowledge of the tourist but the knowledge of one who is

invested in and has a stake in this neighborhood. As such, the congregation does not see itself as trying to reach “them over there” with the gospel, but the congregation is trying to reach “us right here.” Mission is not a matter of us versus them, but is a matter of us and us, sharing the love of Christ in word and deed to serve *our* local community. In this way, a clear demarcation between church and world begins to be blurred by the church’s mission; the neighborhood and the people ultimately belong to God. Acknowledging God’s domain, the congregation takes the risk of entering into life in this place, learning, growing, and serving. This is no sanctuary from the world, no haven of heaven on the earth; this is a distinct people of peace *in* and for their neighborhood.

For example, Holy Cross (*pictured on cover*) is located in what has become a poor, urban, and predominately black neighborhood in Saint Louis, Missouri. When the neighborhood first changed, Holy Cross became a majority commuter church. More recently, however, it has begun to see itself also as a neighborhood church, serving the people nearby. This change in attitude has culminated in powerful service to the neighborhood; Holy Cross has started an after-school art program, the Intersect Arts Center, and computer classes for those who have no computer access.<sup>40</sup> The pastors too are community members who walk the streets, talking with their neighbors. The neighborhood kids have said that Pastor Bob is the only white person that they trust, trust that comes from years of living with these children.<sup>41</sup> Through this intentionally local witness, Holy Cross is living and proclaiming the love of Jesus in a tangible way to its community.<sup>42</sup>

Fourth, the story of Jesus the servant means that congregations must do mission from a position of humility, not power. Fundamentally, this means that congregations must think of themselves as *with* their communities and not *only for* them. Too often, Christians think of social justice as *mercy* ministry, giving out of abundance to those who lack.<sup>43</sup> This, however, places us in a position of power, a giver who has nothing to receive. Acts of mercy are good and necessary, but a great danger exists that such acts of mercy are more concerned with the feelings of the giver than the humanity of the one in need. The service of Christ Jesus was not only about acts of mercy, but also about entering into life with humanity, growing in favor and stature, listening and living with creatures as well as giving.<sup>44</sup> Genuine Christian service is more than giving to another in need; Christian service receives another as truly human, made in the image of God. Thus, Samuel Wells and Marcia Owens have argued that Christians should not predominantly *work for* the disadvantaged, helping them with discrete acts of mercy and justice, but should *be with* them in all walks of life in order to hear their stories, know them as people redeemed by Christ, and serve them with the gospel.<sup>45</sup> Congregations, then, serve their communities first by being present with them, listening, and learning. Such service does not come with ready-made answers, quick to talk and slow to listen, but follows the humiliation of Jesus to come into life with the community and the world. This kind of entrance into life may not seem

like it does much, but through prayer and presence, the church inhabits the story of Christ's service who entered into life with us in order that he would save us in him. The congregation's goal for service is not to "get things done" so that it can feel better about itself, posting on social media about its accomplishments. Such "ministry" is largely a way to win power through generating a favorable image. Instead, the congregation's goal is to enter into life with local people, serving the community from within. This may lead to working with or for the community, but fundamentally, being with people treats them as humans created and redeemed by God.

Service, therefore, will often mean partnering with local groups in order to learn as well as give. For example, mission trips should be seen less as "our mission to them," and more as an opportunity to learn from and partner with a local church for the sake of Christ's mission. Hence, continuity and partnerships are key virtues for planning mission trips. Only by developing a relationship over time can a congregation truly begin to *be with* and *work with* a local people in service instead of only doing charitable acts from a position of power.<sup>46</sup> Practically speaking, those living locally know best how to make a project serve the area in its needs, the real needs, not simply what an outsider thinks they need. This is not just a matter of practicality, though; service from below embodies Christ's servanthood. The church serves from below not only by doing and giving but by learning and receiving, treating human creatures as those made in God's image who have something to give in return.

## **Conclusion**

Like the man in my Bible study, many Christians are feeling anxious about the church's loss of predominance, but hope abounds. The church, after all, is Christ's; it is his body, and he is its Lord. The mission of the church is his task, and he has graciously brought his people into his work and promised his Spirit to lead and guide us. The stories of Christ the Lord and Christ the servant are powerful narratives for shaping Christian imaginations in the post-Christian world, calling congregations to obedience to the Lord Jesus and service in his way. These stories refine the church's witness by pointing out areas where we have sinned, and they open up imaginative possibilities for ministry while rooting the church in Jesus Christ. Teaching the identity of God, repentance, locality, and service from below are just four of these possibilities. As we attend to the Scriptures and let them shape our sight, God will keep refining his church, leading us to faithfulness to our crucified and risen Lord.

## **Endnotes**

- 1 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 134.
- 2 Michael Knippa, "No 'Lions of Gory Mane': Persecution or Loss of Predominance in American Christianity," *Concordia Journal* 41 (Fall 2015): 293–306. Loss of privilege or predominance is also the description

- of one of the early books on the church in post-Christian North America, Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).
- 3 Hereafter, when I refer to post-Christendom, I do not intend to indicate a disestablished church, but the one in the awkward position of not yet being fully disestablished, as “the dusk of Christendom” suggests.
- 4 This section is a summary and reorientation of my dissertation. For more detail, see chapter 1 of Theodore J. Hopkins, “Christ, Church, and World: A Christological Ecclesiology for Post-Christendom” (Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2016), 11–36. The dissertation is available on [www.tren.com](http://www.tren.com).
- 5 From Catholic theologians like William Cavanaugh to the Protestant Stanley Hauerwas, the church-world relationship is prominent. See William Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) and Stanley Hauerwas, “How the Holy Spirit Works,” in *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 32–52. Even among Reformation theologians, the recent interest in two-kingdom theology likely stems from the same root. See, for example, David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).
- 6 Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 31.
- 7 See Michael Lipka, “Religious ‘Nones’ Are Not Only Growing, They’re Becoming More Secular,” The Pew Research Center, November 11, 2015, accessed June 8, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/11/religious-nones-are-not-only-growing-theyre-becoming-more-secular/>
- 8 Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- 9 *Ibid.*, 253.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 254.
- 11 Cheryl Peterson has seen this clearly: Cheryl M. Peterson, *Who is the Church?: An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).
- 12 Part of the problem here is that we cannot imagine living publicly in a way not structured by macropolitics. See James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 13 Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 8.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 173–84.
- 15 Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 167–68. It is not only teenagers though; see Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), especially 24.
- 16 Smith, *Soul Searching*, 122.
- 17 See also John Wright, *Telling God’s Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007).
- 18 As part of this change in social location, James Davison Hunter documents how Christianity no longer influences high culture in North America as it once did. See *To Change the World*, 79–92.
- 19 Hall, *End of Christendom*, 13–17.
- 20 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 99–149.
- 21 Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 157. Although the trend is toward the “deprivatization of religion,” as Ward argues, the milieu still functions with the framework of privatization, which is part of the problem of purpose in post-Christendom.
- 22 Compare Jeffrey Kloha, “Making Christ’s Reign Known: Church in the New Testament,” in *Inviting Community*, ed. Robert Kolb and Theodore J. Hopkins (Saint Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2013), 35–36.
- 23 See Stephen Pickard, *Seeking the Church: An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (London: SCM, 2012), 118–50.
- 24 This is a point emphasized well by Peterson, *Who Is the Church*, 32.

- 25 For an excellent argument for a Christ-centered approach to theology, see Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 26 I do not claim that these are the only ways to tell the story of Jesus, only that these are true (biblical) and helpful. There are, of course, four Gospels that render the identity of Jesus, and we should not try to reduce Jesus to one single telling of his story, particularly since our theological portrayals are already summaries of the Gospel.
- 27 C. Kavin Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006).
- 28 For a more detailed account of Jesus as Lord, see Hopkins, “Christ, Church, and World,” 221–35.
- 29 For a detailed account of Jesus the Servant, see Hopkins, “Christ, Church, and World,” 246–63.
- 30 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” in *Berlin, 1932–33*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, vol. 12 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 360. Luther too speaks this way; see Johann Anselm Steiger, “The *Communicatio Idiomatum* as the Axle and Motor of Luther’s Theology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (2000): 136.
- 31 Concerning the logics of theology, on which I am dependent, see David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 1:27–119. See also Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).
- 32 On the modern social imaginary and God’s place within it, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).
- 33 Ward, *Politics of Discipleship*, 171.
- 34 Contra Ed Stetzer, “The Dangerous Divide between Theology and Practicality,” *Christianity Today*, June 15, 2016, accessed June 30, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2016/june/dangerous-divide-between-theology-and-practicality.html>. For a good account of the relationship, see Stanley Hauerwas, “The ‘How’ of Theology and Ministry,” in *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 103–21.
- 35 Stanley Hauerwas, “How to Write a Theological Sentence,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 57, no. 1 (Christmas 2013): 70–71. This is a modification of the philosopher Iris Murdoch’s position.
- 36 This is why Charles Arand says, “Not all adiaphora are created equal.” Practice is rarely mere practice. It almost always concerns ontology and faithfulness. Charles P. Arand, “Not All Adiaphora Are Created Equal,” *Concordia Journal* 30, no. 3 (July 2004): 156–64.
- 37 James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 142.
- 38 Eric O. Jacobsen, *The Space Between: A Christian Engagement with the Built Environment* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 195.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 194–196.
- 40 For more information on the Intersect Arts Center, see <http://www.intersectstl.org/>. The center also provides free classes for adults.
- 41 Bob Bernhardt, e-mail message to author, July 5, 2016.
- 42 For a historical example of local ministry, from Chicago during the civil rights era, see Theodore J. Hopkins and Mark A. Koschmann, “Faithful Witness in Wounded Cities: Congregations and Race in America,” *Lutheran Mission Matters* 24, no. 2 (2016): 247–63. The issue can be found online at <http://lsfm.global/>.
- 43 The common Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod translation of diakonia as “mercy” may reflect this.
- 44 Elsewhere, I have argued for listening as one of the central tasks of the church in a post-Christian context. We listen first to God and second to the neighbor, especially the poor, the marginalized, and the enemy. Theodore J. Hopkins, “Theology in a Post-Christian Context: Two Stories, Two Tasks,” *Concordia Theological Journal of Concordia University* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 55–57.
- 45 Samuel Wells and Marcia A. Owens, *Living Without Enemies: Being Present in the Midst of Violence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), 23–26.
- 46 *Ibid.*



# Justification as the Ground and Goal of the Christian Life in Luther's Catechisms

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Justification by faith may seem to have outlived its usefulness. When American culture no longer fosters Christian morality, good works and moral formation seem to require our focus more than justification.

Few books capture the mood of

contemporary American Christianity toward our cultural setting more than Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon's *Resident Aliens*.<sup>1</sup> In this trendsetting work, they argue that since American culture no longer serves as a prop for the church, the time has arrived for Christians to see themselves as a people set apart from the world. Christians need to embrace the unique moral character of the Christian story in order to live as a distinctive people. For many, our times seem to require a focus on Christian activity, and while justification by faith may be the way we are made right before God, we should be careful that we are not lulled into the passive life.

Luther's catechisms should lead us to think differently about the importance of justification in a post-Christian age. In Luther's catechisms, justification is not only the source of the Christian life but also its goal. Humanity's root problem is not that we are immoral people. Our root problem is that we do not think that God is a good gift giver and if we were in charge, we could do better. The Christian life, then, is one in which we constantly grow into our justification by God; that is, every day we learn anew to die to our attempts at living by our own strength and merit, and live instead by the superabundant gifts of God.

Building on the Small Catechism's confession that God has made me "out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all,"<sup>2</sup> Oswald Bayer argues that the doctrine of justification has ontological significance. Because we are created out of nothing, every moment of our existence

is a pure gift from the hands of our Creator. To be a human being is to live by faith in the gifts of another.<sup>3</sup> This essay will demonstrate that such a comprehensive understanding of justification lies at the heart of Luther's catechisms. It will first identify the root conflict of the Christian life in Luther's catechisms as a conflict between God, who is the good gift giver, and human beings, who refuse to receive gifts from God and would rather live by their own strength and merit. In describing this root conflict, the chief parts will emerge as the tools that God uses to put our self-reliant old Adams to death and raise up Christians who live by fear, love, and trust in the giver of all good gifts.

### ***The Ten Commandments***

Luther's begins his catechisms with an innovation. He places the Ten Commandments first, before the Creed and the Lord's Prayer.<sup>4</sup> At first glance, this placement may give the impression that the Christian life is framed by moral expectations. Human beings are measured by their performance of the good. The First Commandment, however, teaches us to see our fundamental problem not as a failure to live up to moral expectations, but a failure to look to the Creator for all good in life.

God, according to the first commandment, is an overflowing source of good. Luther goes so far as to incorrectly derive the German word *Gott* from *gut*. He writes, "This, I think, is why we Germans from ancient times have called God by a name more elegant and worthy than found in any other language, a name derived from the word 'good,' because he is an eternal fountain who overflows with pure goodness and from whom pours forth all that is truly good" (K/W, 389). In his explanation of the Lord's Prayer, in the Large Catechism, Luther uses the same image of God as an eternal fountain of good, but develops it further. "But because he is God, he also claims the honor of giving far more abundantly and liberally than anyone can comprehend—like an eternal, inexhaustible fountain, which, the more it gushes forth and overflows, the more it continues to give" (K/W, 447). God is not only an eternal fountain of goodness, but also one that flows out inexhaustibly so that the more it gives out the more it has to give.

Although David Bentley Hart develops it for a different purpose, the distinction he makes in his book *The Experience of God* between "God" and "god" proves helpful in understanding Luther's statement. Hart writes against those who would argue that God does not exist because we can explain the causes of the universe immanently, for instance, according to the laws of gravity. Hart points out that their conception of god is of a force immanent to the universe so that the more comprehensive the laws of gravity are in explaining the motion of the universe, the more this god is excluded. The Christian conception of God, however, is not of another force within the universe, but that absolute being which transcends all created things.

God so understood is not something posed over against the universe, in addition to it, nor is he the universe itself. He is not a “being,” at least not in the way that a tree, a shoemaker, or a god is a being; he is not one more object in the inventory of things that are, or any sort of discrete object at all. Rather, all things that exist receive their being continuously from him, who is the infinite wellspring of all that is, *in whom* (to use the language of the Christian scriptures) all things live and move and have their being. In one sense he is “beyond being,” if by “being” one means the totality of discrete, finite things. In another sense he is “being itself,” in that he is the inexhaustible source of all reality, the absolute upon which the contingent is always utterly dependent, the unity and simplicity that underlies and sustains the diversity of finite and composite things.<sup>5</sup>

When Luther describes God as an inexhaustible fountain, he describes God as the transcendent Creator. Because this God is not another thing within the universe, his abilities to provide are unconstrained. If he were just another being within the universe, God’s gift-giving abilities would be limited to the constraints of being. Even if God were conceived on a scale of being as the infinite being over finite beings, this would still limit what God could do. For instance, he could not be locally present in finite human flesh. But as the transcendent Creator, God is the inexhaustible source of gifts, whose giving is unlimited and unrestrained by anything within creation.

Therefore, according to the Large Catechism’s description of him, God is the inexhaustible source of all good things, who can perpetually make something out of nothing. But as the Creator, God is not only able to pour out innumerable good things, he constantly does exactly that. The Small Catechism captures God’s incessant gift giving simply.

I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property—along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. (K/W, 354)

Furthermore, Luther adds, “all this is done out of pure, fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all” (K/W, 354–355). Oswald Bayer points out that Luther’s concluding statement means that creation is a categorical gift.<sup>6</sup> Nothing within creation deserves or merits existence. God is not like Plato’s demiurge, who has to work with what he is given. That there is something

rather than nothing, that we exist and have a body and soul, eyes and ears, house and home, food and clothing, and that these are constantly in our possession, is a pure, unmerited gift of God; that is to say, a gift that is unrestrained by anything outside of God. Not only is God the only one who *can* give like an inexhaustible fountain, God constantly *does* give like an inexhaustible fountain. Everything we have in life and every moment of our existence is pure gift, constantly flowing out of the Creator's limitless storehouse.

As creatures, our fundamental relationship with God, the irreducible character of our existence, is that God is a good gift giver and we are receivers of God's gifts. When God commands that we should have no other gods before him, then, God demands that we look to him alone for all good. Luther summarizes the command this way: "He wishes to turn us away from everything else apart from him, and to draw us to himself, because he is the one, eternal good. It is as if he said: 'What you formerly sought in the saints, or what you hoped to receive from mammon or from anything else, turn to me for all of this; look on me as the one who will help you and lavish all good things upon you richly'" (K/W, 388). And Luther puts the commandment into the form of an invitation from God: "'Whatever good thing you lack, look to me for it and seek it from me, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, crawl to me and cling to me. I, I myself, will give you what you need and help you out of every danger. Only do not let your heart cling to or rest in anyone else'" (K/W, 387). Our fundamental relationship with God is one in which God gives lavishly out of his abundance and we look to him in order to receive all good things.

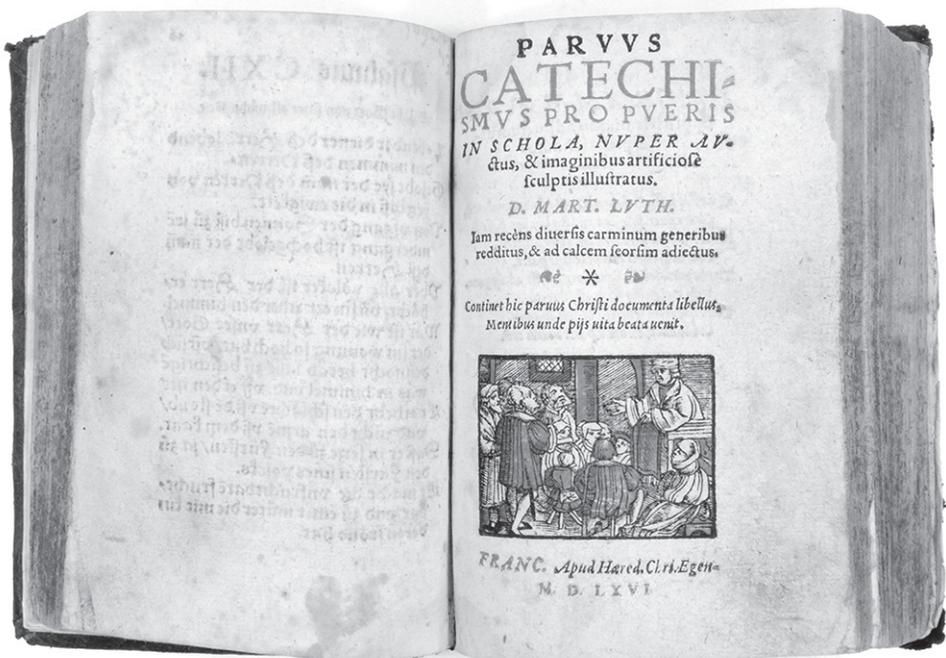
We break this fundamental relationship, or we have a different god, then, when we look to something else for all good in life. As Luther says, "A 'god' is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart" (K/W, 386). Our root sin is not to make bad choices according to a standard of right and wrong, good and bad. Our fundamental sin is that we do not expect good things from God. As Luther puts it, "Idolatry does not consist merely of erecting an image and praying to it, but it is primarily a matter of the heart, which fixes its gaze upon other things and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, and devils. It neither cares for God nor expects good things from him sufficiently to trust that he wants to help, nor does it believe that whatever good it encounters comes from God" (K/W, 388). We create false gods, then, by looking to other things as if they provided all good and could help us in time of need, so that if we have them, we think, then we are happy and secure; and if we lack them, we "doubt and despair as if [we] knew no god at all" (K/W, 387).

Luther gives several examples of how we break this commandment. These include money, learning, wisdom, and power. But Luther also includes good works. He writes,

There is, moreover, another false worship . . . It involves only that conscience that seeks help, comfort, and salvation in its own works and presumes to wrest heaven from God . . . It relies on such things and boasts of them, unwilling to receive anything as a gift from God, but desiring to earn everything by itself or to merit everything by works of supererogation, just as if God were in our service or debt and we were his liege lords. (K/W, 388–389)

Put another way, our good works become our greatest sins when we trust in them. For then we look to ourselves for all good in life.

Luther's observation should lead us to revalue good works. One might be a good person because he or she conforms to a vision of the good, making good decisions and doing good things. But as long as we look to those actions for all good in life we fail to keep the first commandment. Put another way, the remaining commandments are not an independent standard of morality. Instead, commandments two through ten test where we look for all good in life. For example, if our hearts look to God for all good things, then we will honor our father and mother. And if we fail to honor



*The title page of a later 16th-century Latin edition of Luther's Catechism for students, which includes a hand-colored woodcut (Credit: Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University).*

our father and mother, then we have not simply broken a rule. We have failed to look to God for all good things.

Commandments two through ten provide a comprehensive investigation of our various walks of life. In every creaturely setting, they ask whether we look to God for all good gifts. Each of the remaining commandments focuses on a gift that God gives us, and instructs us to live by faith in the giver. For example, the second commandment instructs us to use God's name as the gift it is by using "that very name in every time of need to call on, pray to, praise and give thanks to God" (K/W, 352). After all, God's name has been given to us "precisely for our use and benefit" (K/W, 394). Or, the fifth commandment, puts a wall and fortress around the bodies of our neighbor so that when we are wronged in our own body we will, "with heartfelt confidence and prayer in his name, commit whatever wrong we suffer to God" (K/W, 411). Or again, the seventh commandment teaches us to find satisfaction in the property and possessions God gives us. For, "here you have a rich Lord, who is surely sufficient for your needs and will let you lack or want for nothing" (K/W, 420).

If we break any of the commandments, then, we do not simply break a standard of good behavior. We refuse to receive God's gifts and live by our own strength and merit instead. For example, when we use God's name to cover a lie, or to preach falsely, Luther recognizes that, "all of this is an attempt to deck yourself out with God's name or to put up a good front and justify yourself with his name" (K/W, 393). Or Luther remarks that God gives the fifth commandment because "he always wants to remind us to recall the first commandment, that he is our God; that is, that he wishes to help, comfort, and protect us, so that he may restrain our desire for revenge" (K/W, 413). Or again, Luther writes of those who steal: "we will stand by and let such people fleece, grab, and hoard. But we will trust God, who takes matters into his own hands" (K/W, 418).

The Ten Commandments, then, are not the church's "distinctive way of doing politics,"<sup>7</sup> nor are they primarily the "essential requirements of life."<sup>8</sup> The commandments are the tools that God uses to examine how, in the daily walks of creaturely life, we think that God is not a good gift giver and if we were in charge we could do better. They address not our actions but our faith.

And in that role, they function to make us sinners. Luther's description of the office of the law in the Smalcald Articles fits the Ten Commandments precisely. "The foremost office or power of the law is that it reveals inherited sin and its fruits. It shows human beings into what utter depths their nature has fallen and how completely corrupt it is. The law must say to them that they neither have nor respect any god or that they worship foreign gods. This is something that they would not have believed before without the law" (K/W, 312). The Ten Commandments make us sinners, and not only by revealing the ways in which we fail to look to God for all good gifts, but also by threatening the futility of living by our own strength

and merit. They make us feel our sin.<sup>9</sup> In the close of the commandments, and throughout his exposition of the commandments, Luther magnifies God's threat of punishment for those who do not keep the commandments. "He is the sort of God who does not let the wickedness of those who turn away from him go unpunished, and his anger does not cease until the fourth generation, until they are utterly exterminated. Therefore he wants to be feared and not despised" (K/W, 390). And Luther drives home the futility of living as our own god. "Before they know it, they will be ruined, along with all they have trusted in, just as all others have perished who doubtless thought themselves so secure and mighty" (K/W, 391).

While God's wrath may seem to be contrary to his identity as a good gift giver, it is of one piece with his insistence of actually giving us the best gifts. In our insistent refusal to receive from God, we put our lives in the hands of things that are not the eternal, inexhaustible fountain of goodness. And so to turn us from these false gifts, God must bring us to nothing. In this way he wants to take the place of mammon, and all the other idols. That is, he wants to be the one we look to for all good and to despair if we do not have him (K/W, 392).

### ***The Creed***

In the Large Catechism, Luther begins his explanation of the Creed by relating it to the commandments. "Thus far we have heard the first part of the Christian teaching, and in it we have seen all that God wishes us to do and not to do. The Creed properly follows, which sets forth all that we must expect and receive from God; in short, it teaches us to know him perfectly. It is given in order to help us do what the Ten Commandments require of us" (K/W, 431).

The first point to notice about the relationship between the Ten Commandments and the Creed is their difference. The Ten Commandments communicate what God wants us to do. In the commandments, God makes demands of us. The Creed, on the other hand, communicates what we should expect from God. It delivers God's work to us and for our benefit. The Ten Commandments are law and the Creed is gospel. And Luther's explanations of the Creed are confessions that place into the mouth of its hearers the good news of what God does for him or her in particular. For example, when Luther describes what it means for God to be the Creator, he focuses on what God has done for "me."

I hold and believe that I am God's creature, that is, that he has given me and constantly sustains my body, soul, and life, my members great and small, all my senses, my reason and understanding, and the like; my food and drink, clothing, nourishment, spouse and children, servants, house and farm, etc. Besides, he makes all creation help provide the benefits and necessities of life—sun, moon, and stars in the heavens; day and night; air, fire, water, the earth and all that it yields and brings forth; birds, fish, animals,

grain, and all sorts of produce. Moreover, he gives all physical and temporal blessings—good government, peace, security. (K/W, 432)

Luther's explanation also contains an exhortation that returns his readers to the demands of the Ten Commandments, contending that if we believed that we were God's creatures we would devote all things to God and not "swagger about and boast and brag as if we had life, riches, power, honor, and such things of ourselves, as if we ourselves were to be feared and served" (K/W, 433). But the primary purpose of the first article of the Creed is to deliver God to us as a gift so that we, "daily practice this article, impress it upon our minds, and remember it in everything we see and in every blessing that comes our way" (K/W, 433).

The second article speaks directly to those who are harassed by the Ten Commandments' declaration that the gods we have made for ourselves are less than nothing; a people for whom there is no help because they have put their lot with empty and futile gods and "lay under God's wrath and displeasure, sentenced to eternal damnation, as we had merited it and deserved it" (K/W, 434). The Son of God,

in his unfathomable goodness, had mercy on us because of our misery and distress and came from heaven to help us. Those tyrants and jailers have now been routed, and their place has been taken by Jesus Christ, the Lord of life, righteousness, and every good and blessing. He has snatched us, poor lost creatures, from the jaws of hell, won us, made us free, and restored us to the Father's favor and grace. As his own possession he has taken us under his protection and shelter, in order that he may rule us by his righteousness, wisdom, power, life, and blessedness. (K/W, 434)

The second article not only declares our rescue from sin and death, but it announces that in Jesus Christ our Lord, the eternal fountain of all goodness "has given himself completely to us, withholding nothing" (K/W, 434). For in the Son of God's life, death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming, he has given us his own life, righteousness, and power—the life, righteousness, and power of God himself. In Jesus Christ our Lord, God gives us the very best he has to give.

Moreover, the third article confesses how God has given us that gift in particular, namely, through the preached word delivered by the Holy Spirit. This too is a pure gift of God, placed right in our laps apart from any merit or worthiness in us. The Small Catechism puts the matter clearly. "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith" (K/W, 355). The explanations of the Creed deliver God to us just as the first commandment describes him by putting in our mouths the confession of the good news.

The second point to notice about the relationship between the Ten Commandments and the Creed is that the Creed is given so that we can do what the commandments demand. The commandments demand that we look to God for all good gifts. Primarily, they test not our actions but our faith. The Creed gives this faith by giving God himself in richest measure. Luther puts it this way: “For in all three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart and his pure, unutterable love. For this very purpose he created us, so that he might redeem us and make us holy, and, moreover, having granted and bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has also given us his Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself” (K/W, 439). And because in the Creed we are given God’s greatest gifts, we are returned to the commandments to live trusting in God’s goodness in every creaturely walk of life. Luther writes, “Through this knowledge we come to love and delight in all the commandments of God because we see here in the Creed how God gives himself completely to us, with all his gifts and power, to help us keep the Ten Commandments: The Father gives us all creation, Christ all his works, the Holy Spirit all his gifts” (K/W, 440).

To be clear, when Luther says that the Creed gives us the ability to do what the Ten Commandments demand, he does not mean that the commandments are the standard of righteousness before God, and Jesus’s active obedience accomplishes for us what we could not do on our own. Human performance of the good is not finally what the Ten Commandments demand from us. The Ten Commandments demand faith, and the gospel gives the faith that the Ten Commandments demand. In that way, law and gospel work not as a sequence: first feel guilty that you have not accomplished the law and its demands, and then feel confident that Jesus has done it for you.<sup>10</sup> Rather the Ten Commandments and the Creed, law and gospel, work as the two different tools that God uses to create a creature who lives by faith. God uses the Ten Commandments to expose our lack of fear, love, and trust in God throughout our creaturely walks, condemning our self-made lives as futile and hopeless. The Creed gives us a true God in Christ Jesus so that we may return to the commandments and live in faith, receiving God’s good gifts each day. Instead of a sequence of law then gospel, these two words work side-by-side continually on the Christian to kill the old Adam and to raise the new creature in Christ.

This is the progress in the Christian life that Luther speaks about in the Large Catechism on baptism. There, Luther describes the Christian life as, “a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after. For we must keep at it without ceasing, always purging whatever belongs to the old Adam, so that whatever belongs to the new creature may come forth” (K/W, 465). The baptized life is not simply an endless repetition of feeling sorry for our sins and being forgiven. Luther insists that Christians increase in virtue while decreasing in vice (K/W, 465). But this increase in virtue and decrease in vice does not come simply by practicing the Ten Commandments. The Christian life is a life of learning the ways in which we are in

rebellion against God, dying to those ways in repentance, and rising anew by faith in the gospel, delivered through the spoken word in all of its forms, to live outside of ourselves. Trusting in every walk of life that God is a good gift giver, we can live as receivers of God's good gifts, for example, by refusing revenge and giving over the wrong done against us to his care.

### ***The Lord's Prayer***

The connection between the doctrine of justification by faith and prayer may not seem at all obvious. But when the whole Christian life is seen as a life of growing into our justification, learning every day to die to our attempts at living by our own strength and merit and living instead by the superabundant gifts of God, prayer has a central place. Prayer is for the needy. Prayer is for those who depend on someone else for all that they have in life. The Lord's Prayer teaches us to call upon God, recognizing that we are beggars and that God is an eternal and inexhaustible fountain. We learn that God "desires nothing more from us than that we ask many and great things of him. And, on the contrary, he is angered if we do not ask and demand with confidence" (K/W, 447).

Prayer is for the needy. However, we do not always know what we really need. Because we invest in false gods, trusting in mammon, our own good works, and various other forms of personal success, we do not know what to ask for. As Luther puts it, "For we are all lacking plenty of things: all that is missing is that we do not feel them or see them" (K/W, 444). Moreover, because we prefer to get by on our own strength and merit, it would kill us to ask God for the very best he has to give. Luther describes our situation stunningly:

Imagine if the richest and most powerful emperor commanded a poor beggar to ask for whatever he might desire and was prepared to give lavish, royal gifts, and the fool asked only for a dish of beggar's broth. He would rightly be considered a rogue and a scoundrel, who had made a mockery of the imperial majesty's command and was unworthy to come into his presence. Just so, it is a great reproach and dishonor to God if we, to whom he offers and pledges so many inexpressible blessings, despise them or lack confidence that we shall receive them and scarcely venture to ask for a morsel of bread. (K/W, 447)

Luther, then, summarizes our condition: "The fault lies wholly in that shameful unbelief that does not look to God even for enough to satisfy the belly, let alone expect, without doubting eternal blessings from God" (K/W, 447–448). Prayer is for the needy, but we do not often know what we really need, nor are we willing to ask for it. God uses the Lord's Prayer to teach us what we truly need so that we can receive God's gifts.

Luther's commentary on the Lord's Prayer in the Large Catechism divides into two parts. First, Luther uses God's commands and promises to rouse us into treating God as a good gift giver. Second, Luther uses the petitions of the Lord's Prayer to instruct us to ask for the truly good gifts.

The first part of Luther's commentary takes aim to kill the old Adam, who refuses to receive a gift from God, and to raise the new creature, who eagerly accepts them. He preaches both law and gospel, threatening God's wrath if we do not pray and promising God's faithfulness to answer our prayers. Luther begins by insisting that it is our duty to pray because of God's command. Luther has in mind here the second commandment's demands that we treat God as a good gift giver by calling upon his name in every time of need (K/W, 441). Such a demand brings with it encouragement that God will hear us regardless of our doubts and despite our sin, and threatens that God will be angry if we do not pray (K/W, 441–442). Again, the threat that God will be angry if we do not call upon him may seem to contradict God's promise that he will hear our prayers regardless of our sin. But as in the close of the commandments, God's threats are of one piece with his identity as a good gift giver. God is jealous to give us his good gifts, and when we turn aside to other givers and refuse to ask God for anything at all, we should expect his anger. Both encouragements and threats chasten our old Adam's refusal to turn to God for all that we need.

If God attacks our old Adam's insistence on living by its own strength and merit with his commands, God nourishes the new creature by lavishing promises that he will hear and answer. Luther brings out God's promises to answer our prayers from Psalm 50:15 and Jesus's words in Matthew 7:7–8. Then he assures and encourages the reader: "You can hold such promises up to him and say, 'Here I come, dear Father, and pray not of my own accord nor because of my own worthiness, but at your commandment and promise, which cannot fail or deceive me'" (K/W, 443). And if God's promises were not enough to enliven the new creature, God encourages us by giving us the very words to pray. Luther writes, "God takes the initiative and puts into our mouths the very words and approach we are to use. In this way we see how deeply concerned he is about our needs, and we should never doubt that such prayer pleases him and will assuredly be heard" (K/W, 443).

Once Luther has incited his reader to call upon God for all things, Luther turns to the petitions in order to instruct and incite us to ask God for the best God has to give. The first three petitions group around the Second Petition. In asking for God's kingdom to come, we ask for the highest and greatest treasure God has to give. We ask that the gift described in the Creed would come to us, namely that the gospel would be preached throughout the world and that we may receive it in faith, both now and until the devil's kingdom is completely destroyed (K/W, 447). But Luther not only teaches us to ask for God's kingdom, he magnifies it above all the other gifts. "From this you see that we are not asking here for crumbs or for a temporal,

perishable blessing, but for an eternal, priceless treasure and for everything that God himself possesses. It would be far too great for any human heart to dare to desire it if God himself had not commanded us to ask for it” (K/W, 447). And Luther chastises us for not thinking to ask for such a gift. Here is where Luther likens us to a poor beggar, who refuses to ask the most powerful emperor for anything more than a “dish of beggar’s broth” (K/W, 447–448).

The fourth petition teaches us to recognize that all we need for the day comes from God’s hand and not by our own cunning and hard work (K/W, 451). The fifth petition teaches us to ask God for forgiveness. On the one hand, such a request kills the old Adam who would not take a gift from God (K/W, 452). At the same time, this petition strengthens the new creature who turns to God in prayer for what is needed. “For where the heart is not right with God and cannot generate such confidence, it will never dare to pray. But such a confident and joyful heart can never come except when one knows that his or her sins are forgiven” (K/W, 453). The sixth and the seventh petitions teach us to recognize that even though we have these gifts, they are not our own possession. The devil constantly seeks to take them from us, and without God’s intervention, we would be helpless before Satan (K/W, 456). Finally the “Amen” captures the whole thrust of the Lord’s Prayer. In saying Amen, we are praying to God with confidence that he is our true and only gift giver. Those who do not pray with confidence indicate that, “they are looking not at God’s promise but at their own works and worthiness, and thereby they despise God and accuse him of lying” (K/W, 456). So, Luther concludes by turning us toward the promise: “Look! God has attached much importance to our being certain so that we do not pray in vain or despise our prayers in any way” (K/W, 456).

### ***The Means of Grace***

The means of grace (baptism, the sacrament of the altar, and confession) may seem the most obvious place to look for the topic of justification and the least likely place to look for the Christian life. But the only places in the Large Catechism where Luther speaks directly about progress in the Christian life are in the sections on baptism and the Lord’s Supper (K/W, 465–466, 469). Why are these vehicles of forgiveness the setting for speaking about growth in the Christian life? When we define the Christian life by moral progress, forgiveness appears as patchwork, a concession for our lack of progress, but when the Christian life is defined by receiving God’s gifts, the means of grace play a central role. Our failure, or better described, our rebellion is that we do not want to receive a gift from God. So the means of grace work on our flesh, whose actual weakness is its apparent strength, by cutting off every objection and placing God’s greatest treasures right in our laps.

Throughout his discussion of the means of grace, Luther does two things simultaneously. He declares the means of grace to be the greatest treasure God has to give, while also cutting off every excuse of the old Adam to turn down the gifts of

God in favor of one's own strength or merit. For example, he begins his discussion on baptism by pointing out that baptism is God's work. Because the one who commanded baptism is the eternal Son of God, the work is not a human work, but the work of the Almighty God himself. Therefore, Luther argues, baptism is infinitely greater than any work we would perform, even though those works seem "precious and dazzling" (K/W, 458).

Meanwhile, just as Luther extols the means of grace as the greatest treasures God has to give, he goes to work on the old creature who would find every excuse not to take the gift. Here Luther answers two different opponents in the sacramental controversies by insisting in each case that the means of grace are to be received as a gift from God over against our own work or merit. Both the Anabaptists and Rome turn the focus of baptism and the Lord's Supper away from God to our own strength and merit. The new spirits say that baptism is nothing and that faith is everything. To these Luther emphasizes that baptism is a work of God and not dependent on our faith: "For my faith does not make a baptism; rather it receives baptism. Baptism does not become invalid if it is not properly used, as I have said, for it is not bound to our faith but to the Word" (K/W, 463). On the other hand, Rome says that baptism saves because it is a work that merits grace by its performance. To these Luther emphasizes that baptism is a gift, and gifts are to be received; that is, trusted in and relied upon. "Thus you see plainly that baptism is not a work that we do but that it is a treasure that God gives us and faith grasps, just as the Lord Christ upon the cross is not a work but a treasure placed in the setting of the Word and offered to us in the Word and received by faith." Therefore, "we insist on faith alone as so necessary that without it nothing can be received or enjoyed" (K/W, 461).<sup>11</sup>

Finally, for the flesh that has grown indifferent to God's gifts and does not care to receive them, Luther diagnoses this not as licentiousness as it would be in the moral scheme, but as a refusal to enjoy God's graciousness. For example, rather than demand that people come to confession, making it a new law that binds consciences, Luther emphasizes that Christians are people who receive gifts. If you don't want to receive a gift then don't consider yourself a Christian. He writes, "*No one needs to drive you to confession by commanding it. Rather, we say this: Whoever is a Christian, or would like to be one, has here the reliable advice to go and obtain this precious treasure. If you are not a Christian, and desire no such comfort, we shall leave you to another's power*" (K/W, 478 [italics in the original]).

## **Preaching**

According to Luther's catechisms, the Christian life is one in which we daily die to our attempts at living by our own strength and merit, and live instead by faith in God's superabundant gifts. Moreover, the chief parts of the catechism not only describe this life, they affect this death and life. The Ten Commandments expose the ways we reject God's good gifts in our various lifestyles, they threaten the futility of

living by our own strength and merit, and they declare God's wrath. The Creed gives God himself to us as the first commandment describes him—the One who is an endless fountain of good gifts—and returns us to the Ten Commandments so that we can live as a receiver of God's good gifts in every walk of life. The Lord's Prayer teaches us to treat God as a good gift giver daily by calling upon him in every time of need, and it teaches us to ask for the greatest gifts from God. The means of grace chasten our flesh, which does not trust that God is a good gift giver, by cutting off every objection we could make and placing the greatest treasures right in our laps.

The final point is that the chief parts of the catechism accomplish all of this through preaching. The chief parts cut away at our insistence on being our own god and deliver God's rich and abundant gifts through the performative word. Luther not only talks about the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, or the means of grace, he makes the threats that cut in at the old Adam's self-confidence and refusal to let God be God. For instance, on the seventh commandment he declares, "In short, no matter how much you steal, be certain that twice as much will be stolen from you . . . Because everyone robs and steals from everyone else, God has mastered the art of punishing one thief by means of another. Otherwise, where would we find enough gallows and rope?" (K/W, 419). Likewise, Luther delivers promises that create faith in God's rich abundance. On the words of institution, Luther declares, "These words, as I have said, are not preached to wood or stone but to you and me; otherwise he might just as well have kept quiet and not instituted a sacrament. Ponder, then, and include yourself personally in the 'you' so that he may not speak to you in vain" (K/W, 473). And, Luther is not afraid to let both threats and promises stand side by side. For instance, when commenting on Jesus's promise in Matthew 7 that God will hear our prayers, Luther declares: "You can hold such promises up to him and say, 'Here I come, dear Father, and pray not of my own accord nor because of my own worthiness, but at your commandment and promise, which cannot fail or deceive me.' Those who do not believe such a promise should again realize that they are angering God, grossly dishonoring him, and accusing him of lying" (K/W, 443). Luther puts the catechism to work by making these words of God living words that comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

The Christian life, therefore, is not characterized by our activity, but by our receptivity. Christians are people who suffer the work of God. In the midst of our daily activities, God works on us through the living word to put to death our attempts at self-justification and to raise creatures—Christians—who live by faith in the giver of all good gifts.

## Endnotes

- 1 Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A provocative Christian assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know That Something Is Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).
- 2 *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 354–55. (All references to the Large Catechism are from Kolb and Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* and are cited hereafter parenthetically in text using K/W, page number).
- 3 Oswald Bayer, “The Doctrine of Justification and Ontology,” trans. Christine Helmer, *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 43 (2001), 44–53.
- 4 See, Charles P. Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther’s Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 123–141.
- 5 David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 30.
- 6 Bayer, “Doctrine of Justification and Ontology,” 44–46.
- 7 Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1999), 19.
- 8 Charles P. Arand, Robert Kolb, James A. Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 76.
- 9 See *Luther’s Works*. Eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, vols. 1–55; Christopher Boyd Brown, vols. 56–80, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955–1986) 12:310. *Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1980), 40:326–327. Rather than narrowly describing an emotion, Luther uses this phrase to indicate the experience of judgment and condemnation by God.
- 10 Gerhard O. Forde, “Christian Life” in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jensen (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 412–422, argues that the psychological rendering of law and gospel is of one piece with the legal scheme. Feeling sorry for sin furthers “one’s own quest” in attaining virtue.
- 11 For parallel arguments in the sacrament of the altar, see Kolb/Wengert, 469–470.



# *Homiletical Helps*



# LSB Series A, Proper 28 to Series B, Transfiguration

## *Proper 28 · 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 · November 19, 2017*

“Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you” (v. 1). Indeed, we do not need to be told that our world is in crisis. Global and local events cascade into a rapid succession of actions and reactions. Some of these events are intentional; some bring on the inevitable. There is deep fear in these “times and seasons.” They bring us to the verge of an unknown future.

But when we are brought to the point of the unknown, our hope is in the One who meets us there: “For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (v. 2). The times and seasons may belong to crisis, but the day belongs to the Lord! However, even that day forces us to confront another unknown. We do not know when Christ Jesus will come to culminate all things under his Lordship. Yet because this unknown is left in the scar-healed hands of the crucified and risen One, it becomes a source not of fear, but of hope.

Here, in Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, is eschatology par excellence: the juxtaposition of fear and hope, judgment and salvation, darkness and light, drunkenness and sobriety. All of which signal the labor pains of a new reign of God breaking into this hung-over world. (The new-year season of Advent is just around the corner, after all.)

But, for the preacher, the question remains: how do we get from fear to hope? Or, better still, how does this word of God move us from fear to hope? Perhaps we should first note Paul’s irony: our certainty is in the uncertainty of Christ’s return. Thus, we need not concern ourselves with reading tea leaves for clues to the eschaton.

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### *Editor’s note*

*These Homiletical Helps are curated from the collection at Lectionary at Lunch Plus, where you can find a full range of resources for all the pericopies:*  
[www.concordiatheology.org/llalp](http://www.concordiatheology.org/llalp).

This makes our certainty in uncertainty a liberating knowledge. We do not need someone to tell us “There is peace and security” (v. 3). We already have it by the faith that trusts him of whom we proclaim, “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” All of time is taken up within his Lordship—both “night” and “day”—and by that same Lordship Christ makes of us, in water and word, “children of light and children of the day” (v. 5). Our end, in more ways than one, is in Christ, and that is all we need to know. Our “surprise” then is not because Christ is a thief (v. 4). We are surprised by the joy (to paraphrase C. S. Lewis’s title) of what we already know, of which Paul does not have to tell us. There is a paradox here. We are surprised by the fact that all this time we already knew the end of this story.

This is why when we are surprised by joy, we are surprised by hope (to paraphrase N. T. Wright’s title, paraphrasing Lewis). And this hope compels us to “keep awake and be sober” (v. 6). Notice how this hope equips our whole person: “Put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation” (v. 8). Our Lord Jesus fortifies both heart and mind with faith, hope, and love. To preach this hope means to preach it to the whole person as well.

Finally, how does hope express itself in the “everyday” of those who await the Lord’s coming? It is the same in good times and in bad: “Encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (v. 11). The preacher here has a choice either to exhort his hearers to encourage others, or to encourage them directly. We could do little better in these bewildering times than to preach an encouraging word to discouraged people.

*Travis J. Scholl*

### **Proper 29 • Matthew 25:31–46 • November 26, 2017**

This is a difficult text. Not that it is difficult to understand. In fact, it is altogether too easy to grasp the meaning, which is precisely what makes it difficult. There is no question about the message Jesus intends to convey with this poignant parable. There is no dodging the impact of the message with claims of obscurity or interpretative uncertainty. The text is clear and confronts us with the unsettling reality that if this were all we had of Jesus’s teaching, we would be consigned to a religion of work-righteousness. But we do have more, and the context provided by that further teaching provides a legitimate solution to the dilemma of this text. The peril facing contemporary preachers striving for doctrinal fidelity is to over-correct the works-righteous trajectory of Jesus’s teaching, and so eviscerate the text of its substance and blunt its sharp barbs.

The solution to the apparent bind is to discern the cause for the separation of sheep from goat (the only categories into which people are placed). The standard is not human performance. The criteria of judgment lie well beyond the actions of sheep or goat. The distinction was fixed “from the foundation of the world.” The sheep are the elect, chosen by God. They do nothing to lay claim on their place at

Jesus's right hand. They are righteous by grace in Christ. For the goats, the accursed, there is no mention of a place prepared from eternity. Indeed, so unusual and unexpected is their fate, that they are consigned to a place not prepared for them—a place called into existence only out of necessity. Condemnation was not the plan of the Creator.

Before getting to the business at hand—how one might preach this text faithfully—one other point deserves attention. Neither goat nor sheep was aware of the presence of Jesus hidden in the form of “the least of these.” Ignorance on the part of goats is no surprise; that the sheep have no awareness of Jesus lurking behind the neighbor should give us pause. One hears routinely about “serving Jesus” by doing deeds of kindness in the world. And so pious justification and motivation is provided for any number of possible social welfare activities in and through the church: from building houses in Mexico, to raking the widow's leaves—it's all done “for Jesus.” Popular piety and exegesis notwithstanding, our text does not support but actually contradicts this mindset. One serves the neighbor only for the sake of the neighbor; the single motivation necessary is the need of the neighbor. Sheep serve because they love their neighbor for the neighbor's sake, not because they perceive Jesus standing over the neighbor's shoulder. So oblivious are they of the connection between their deeds of service and their relationship to God through faith that it must be spelled out for them by their Lord. Yes, it is the distinction between the two kinds of righteousness.

Arriving at some practical points of application, two thoughts should stand out for the preacher (who should preach the text as written and not a sanitized version). First, Jesus expects his people to act like his people. Sheep take care of their neighbors. There is an expectation, even an obligation, for Christians to serve those in need (and not Jesus!), and this has nothing to do with election or salvation. The elect simply act like the elect. There is no room for complacency or apathy excused by misapplied or misunderstood gospel. Second, Christians can find remarkable comfort and encouragement in the reality that no deed of service, regardless how obscure, insignificant, or unappreciated is ever wasted or lost. Jesus keeps track.

### **Sermon Specifics**

*Goal:* To exhort Christ's sheep to be busy in doing good works for the neighbor.

*Malady:* Even sheep can become complacent and direct their efforts in the wrong directions (working “at church” may well interfere with a sheep's proper work as defined by vocation).

*Means:* The good Shepherd who elects and calls his sheep and separates them from the goats, showed us throughout his earthly ministry how to treat others—both sheep and goats.

*Joel Biermann*

## **Advent 1 • Mark 13:24–37 • December 3, 2017**

One of my greatest Advent frustrations has been an ongoing encounter with a fundamental misunderstanding of the season's purpose. Whether introducing the season to people unfamiliar with it, searching for materials to use in the classroom, or planning our own family Advent celebrations, for years I have seen, and continue to see, Advent presented as the Christian alternative to a December of malls, mayhem, and maxed-out credit cards. It is presented as “the better way to prepare for Christmas.” Advent, we are to believe, is best used to create family traditions, to bring meaning back to our Christmas celebrations, to find “special moments,” to prepare to celebrate Jesus's birth, or to learn to treasure Christmas in our hearts. From here it is a very small step toward regarding Advent as nostalgic (recovering lost traditions or remembering better times) or even sentimental (making this the best, most meaningful Christmas ever). And, of course, in the pastor's study these sentiments manifest themselves in thoughts like: “Is it already Advent *again?*” and “What *am I* going to do *this* year?”

The gospel from Mark 13 rouses us from these dancing-sugarplum visions of Advent like a shot of eschaton espresso. The first Advent voice that speaks to us is the Advent Voice—not the hopeful voice of the prophet, not the awed and exotic whispers of foreign sages, not the cooing of a sweet baby, nor the lullaby of a tender, young mother. It is the voice of the Son of Man, a voice that speaks of tribulation and darkness, a voice of warning and command. And what he said to them then he says to us now: “Stay awake!”

### **A Thematic Jumble?**

The ESV divides the pericope into three paragraphs, each with its own heading. Nestle-Aland 27 divides the reading into five paragraphs, reflecting even more carefully the constantly changing topic of Jesus's discourse. The passage contains prophetic warnings, an extended quotation of an anthology of Old Testament verses, two parables, instruction concerning the eternally reliable nature of his word, a provocative Christological statement, and a closing one-word application for the hearer/reader. How is a preacher ever going to do justice to a text like this—especially when he wants to introduce a unifying theme for a season already full of distractions?

I am going to make a daring gamble, departing from my usual homiletical principles and betting on your ability to approach these four Advent gospels from a new perspective without losing your sermonic center of balance. What I mean is this: our unifying theme for the season and for this message is most easily found by focusing on the implications for us, as God's Advent People, rather than by launching a direct assault on what these gospels are telling us *about Jesus*. I wouldn't risk so much unless I thought that, in the end, we will hear again and anew what these four gospels are telling us about our Advent Lord as well.

## Exegetical Problems as Exegetical Keys

I have often found in my study of a particular text that the key to unlocking the meaning of the entire passage often lies in the word, phrase, or verse that is giving me the most trouble. This is also the case with this text. Mark 13 presents a number of exegetical challenges, but the preacher— thanks be to God!—does not have to address them all on Advent 1. The text graciously begins after the passages about the abomination of desolation and the shortening of the days in Mark 13:14–23. The exegetical problem is much less dramatic and may not be apparent on a first reading. Look again at 13:34. In a manner typical of this kind of parable, our Lord describes a variety of servants given a variety of assignments at the departure of their master. What seems atypical is a concluding singling out of the doorkeeper. If the servants represent collectively Jesus’s followers or the church, then who is the doorkeeper? Why is he given a special command to stay awake?

As tempting as it might be to explore the identity of the doorkeeper over against the rest of Jesus’s followers, such a temptation is immediately overcome by the words of Jesus that follow. To his hearers he does not say, “Therefore I am putting you in charge,” but “stay awake.” That is, everyone who hears or reads this parable is to see him/herself as a doorkeeper. The question isn’t: “What do I do while the doorkeepers watch the door?” nor is it: “Why do I have to stay awake and watch the door while everyone else gets to go about his/her normal business?” The question is: *How is my life during these Advent days like that of a doorkeeper watching and waiting, alert and awake, night and day, for the return of his master?* I propose the following as the most economical way to explore the theme and make some connections.

## We Know What We Watch For

I strongly recommend reading R. T. France’s treatment of this section in his commentary on Mark for *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, especially pages 497–505. France argues, rightly and persuasively, that this section of Mark shows the same sort of double focus that we are familiar with from Matthew 24–25. In this case, however, the shift from the discussion about the destruction of the Jerusalem temple to the Parousia of Jesus is more abrupt—and takes place in the middle of our pericope. The shift occurs with the reference to “that day or that hour.” What precedes this shift should be read as referring to the destruction of the temple in history and the “end of the old order” (to borrow France’s term)—the turning point of history brought about by the incarnation, birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and session of the Son. For the original doorkeepers, these words were prophecy; for us, they are historical review.

But that is precisely the point. We, the elect who have already been gathered in, know the world’s story. We are no longer watching for the signs leading up to Jerusalem’s destruction, but we do understand that chapter of history as “the beginning of the end,” as the transition from the old order of Jerusalem and its temple

to the new of Golgotha and its cross. What people are better qualified to serve as “doorkeepers for the world” than those who have been trained to see the world from the divine perspective, who watch the unfolding of its drama with the Playwright’s script in our hands?

### **We Know Whom We Watch For (Part 1)**

There are two ways the text answers this question. Perhaps this twofold responsibility makes the doorkeeper’s position crucially unique and uniquely crucial. What is the significance of the door, if not that it separates outside from inside? First of all, then, the doorkeeper watches for the sake of the others who are “inside.” The image in this parable of the household includes the activities—and the existence—of many other servants. The picture is not of the individual, alone, watching at the door of his/her own house/heart. A community within depends on the doorkeeper for its own state of alert. If the doorkeeper is found asleep at the door, it is not only the returning Lord outside who has been let down, it is also all within who were failed by the doorkeeper. The house in this parable is beginning to sound a lot like the church, but the text as a whole will not allow us to stop there.

What is the lesson of the fig tree? The primary lesson is, of course, that we are not to ignore the “signs of the seasons” with which God surrounds us. At the same time, the fig tree can serve as a reminder that being aware of the seasons and making the appropriate changes doesn’t come as naturally to us as it does to the rest of nature. We cannot count on fallen *humanity* “feeling the sap rise in its branches.” When the Son of Man appears again (the next time the world sees this sign), he will come to gather in his elect—and there is no mention here of preaching and healing and teaching and warning. This angelic ingathering will stretch to the four corners of the world and even from the farthest reaches of earth to the farthest reaches of heaven. Who can number those “within” who depend on the service of us doorkeepers?

### **We Know Whom We Watch For (Part 2)**

The second answer to the question brings us back to the heart of the Advent message. We know whom we watch for in the sense that we know who it is that is coming. And we know much better than the original hearers of these words. Although we are not the blessed ones who lived and worked with, learned from and marveled at Jesus, who beheld him with their own eyes, who knew the sound of his voice, and the touch of his hand, we are the ones who have believed through the word of those who were with him. We know the whole story of incarnation, birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and session. We have seen him vindicated by the Father and given all authority in heaven and on earth. We have been buried with him and with him have risen to new life.

Knowing our Lord as we do should be all that it takes to keep us awake and watchful through this world’s long Adventtide. Still, our Lord knows us even better

than we know him—even better than we know ourselves. His warning and command are no less compassionate than they are earnest. He knows our vulnerability with regard to distraction, boredom, fatigue, despair—with all that might keep us from being his faithful doorkeepers.

At this point, your hearers will certainly be hoping for some word of Advent encouragement, some reason to hope that the favor of the Lord and the fate of the world do not rest solely upon their shoulders. But here, the text ends. The gospel, however, does not end here, and this is one of those occasions where the preacher must import good news from the larger gospel story to prevent misrepresenting one small piece of it. Very natural possibilities that come to mind are the “Look! I am with you always” from Matthew 28 and the “I will not leave you as orphans” and the promise of the Paraclete from John 14. A transition to the latter may come more smoothly, since it would not involve explaining how the Lord who leaves us never leaves us. What the text will not allow is some sort of “gospel comfort” that lulls us back into dreamy drowsiness and dulls the edge of our Lord’s advent charge. The promise of his coming, the world’s Savior for a world in need of saving, should rather renew us in our vigilance, filling us with a joyful anticipation that simply won’t let us sleep.

*Jeffrey A. Oswald*

## **Advent 2 • Isaiah 40:1–11 • December 10, 2017**

The Old Testament lesson for today does more than simply serve as the first lesson for this day; it summarizes the theme of Advent 2. Indeed, it summarizes the message of this entire season of the church year, and then it moves us to respond. It can be said that this remarkable passage is so complete that it summarizes the entire message of the Scriptures and of the Christian church. Surely that is why it is so well loved and so well known.

Isaiah, as God’s messenger called and commissioned by the Lord, knows those to whom he must speak. We, along with the people of Israel, are sinful human beings living in a sinful world. The deadly malignancy of sin has infected and affected everything and everyone: “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty (or “consistency”) is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass” (vv. 6–7).

The prophet knows who God is. He is a God of power and might who is offended by sin: “Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him” (vv. 9–10). This is the God of law who expects obedience but also knows our human condition.

But Isaiah also knows that the creator of the ends of the earth and of the myriads of luminaries in the sky, the eternal and almighty God, is the God who “will tend his flock like a shepherd; will gather the lambs in his arms; . . . carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.” This is the God of love, the God of gospel.

This God forgives sins and builds up his people: “Comfort, comfort my people says your God . . . and cry to Jerusalem that her warfare (or time of service to sin) is ended . . . her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (vv. 1–3).

And now this God, our God, the one who comes, puts his church into action: “In the wilderness (of this world of sin) prepare the way of the Lord; make straight . . . a highway for our God” (v. 3). St. Peter, in today’s epistle, reminds us of our job when he says, “What sort of people ought you be . . . waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God . . . be diligent to be found by him without spot of blemish, and at peace” (2 Pt 3:11, 12, 14). We respond to that challenge because the Christ, whom John the Baptist proclaims in today’s gospel lesson, has baptized us with the Holy Spirit (Mk 1:1–8), and puts us into action.

Our text is an eschatological message of the restoration of the people of God. It is the promise of divine deliverance. In the chapters leading up to our text, Isaiah predicts the Babylonian captivity for Judah, seventy-five years before the days of Babylonian supremacy. The prophecy of exile, which concludes chapter 39 (vv. 6–7), provides the transition point to this chapter’s announcement of salvation in the return from captivity.

Horace Hummel writes: “The historical return to Jerusalem after the Edict of Cyrus (538) is not only depicted in eschatological and cosmological colors, but the two are totally fused: the historical event is a type, ‘sacrament,’ anticipation and proleptic realization of the ‘restoration of all things.’”<sup>1</sup>

In our day we celebrate the eschaton—the now and not yet of the kingdom of God—where our Savior, who has come, comes to us daily and will come again. To a world filled with trial, trouble, and sorrow, the church is called to speak a word of comfort. Just as Joseph comforted his brothers and said to them, “God sent me before you to preserve life” (Gn 45:5), even so today we tell the world how God sent Jesus to preserve our lives—that’s the message of Advent 2. God intends our good—our warfare is ended.

*David Wollenburg*

1 Horace Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 215.

### **Advent 3 • 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24 • December 17, 2017**

It would be tempting to regard this text, a series of short imperative clauses, as a random series of “inspired one-liners” that exhort the Thessalonian believers (and us) to general Christian behaviors and attitudes. To be sure, there’s some truth in such a description, for there is no complex argument involved and the hardest structural question might be to ask whether the grounding clause (v. 18b, “for this is God’s will in Christ Jesus unto/for you”) supports only the immediately prior clause (v. 18a) or the triad of clauses that precedes it (vv. 16–18a). Set in context, however, Paul’s exhortations (and that is what they are) naturally flow as part of the ending of his

letter; they express the ordinary manifestations of the extraordinary Christian life of faith and hope and exhort us to this life.

Rejoice always. This is not a power-of-positive-thinking admonition, nor is it to be taken in a literalistic and legalistic way, as if Christians do not have their times and ways of grieving—although never without hope (1 Thes 4:13). Rejoicing is a regular and consistent expression of life in Christ. The work of the Spirit in the lives of fellow believers is regularly a cause for joy (1 Thes 3:9). All such rejoicing, however, is done ultimately in the Lord (Phil 4:4), that is, in the past, present, and future work of Christ for us and all creation.

Pray unceasingly. Ditto on not reading this literally. But, as Ole Hallesby reminds us, prayer is designed precisely for the helpless, and as believers live in unending and joyful dependence on God's care and provision in Christ, those believers will simply pray as dear children as their dear heavenly Father—without ceasing.

Be thankful in everything. One of the most difficult things I experience in life is the need to adjust to constant change. But, if the God who delivered me in Christ is ever and always at work through (and despite) life's changes, then at the least I can in faith be thankful to him for the work he is doing. Thanksgiving, prayer, and rejoicing are God's will for me in Christ Jesus.

The Holy Spirit is like a fire, purifying and flaming in and through our lives. He comes through the gospel powerfully to create faith and to sustain joy (1 Thes 1:5, 6). His call to obedience must not be resisted in the area of sexual purity (1 Thes 4:7) or elsewhere lest we run the risk of quenching that Spirit's work within and through us.

God's word is the source of every good. When genuine prophecy comes directly from the Lord or (by extension) when God's apostolic word is proclaimed, the only proper response is to believe and respond. To despise prophecy or God's word is to despise the speaking God who gives it and to regard his word as merely the words of men (1 Thes 2:13).

There is still mourning; death and decay and evil still lurk everywhere. Believers must learn to test everything so as to turn away from what is evil and to hold fast to what is good—Christ Jesus, the Spirit-born word about him, the Spirit-produced fruit that blesses our neighbor even when he offers us evil (1 Thes 5:15). The evil in our world and (still) in our flesh comes in many shapes and sizes. Every form of it must be kept at a distance. This too is God's will for us in Christ Jesus the Lord.

One could preach the whole text, and offer to the congregation a general and powerful testimony through St. Paul to the life lived in Christ. Or, one could focus on any of the exhortations and illustrate what it would look like to live the sanctified life of faith even as we look for the day when the God of peace will sanctify us completely, having kept us until the Parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thes 5:23). This God is faithful. We are up and down, and back and forth, but this God is faithful and he will do it (1 Thes 5:24).

*Jeffrey A. Gibbs*

## **Advent 4 • 2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16 • December 24, 2017**

The reading offers, in its OT context, a strong example of the truth that “God’s ways are higher and greater than our ways.” Specifically, the reading presents a powerful contrast between David’s (and Nathan’s) understanding of what the God of Israel planned to do for his people and their king on the one hand, and the intention of the Lord of Hosts for his people on the other hand. In addition to the truths that applied to the historical OT context of King David’s reign over Israel, the lesson leaps out into the future of the people of God. In even greater ways than David, we are invited to see the contrast between human plans and expectations, and the Creator God’s design for the entire world as it has been fulfilled—and *will be fulfilled*—in the one whom we know to be the greater Son of David.

The reading begins (vv. 1–3) with King David living in his own royal palace, at peace and at rest from all his enemies. In an apparently pious and positive way, David perceives a serious inequity; the God of Israel has done much for him, but the king is allowing the ark of the covenant to be housed in the temporary structure of the tabernacle. David thinks that he sees the scope of God’s deliverance and favor, and now he wants to give something back to the Lord God. He tells Nathan, and the prophet agrees; “The Lord is with you,” says the prophet. Neither the prophet nor the king, however, has any real understanding of how greatly the Lord intends to bless.

The “higher and greater” of God’s response comes in three parts. First (vv. 4–7), the Lord speaks to Nathan and through him, and the message is a “no” to David’s plan. David is not to build a house. Such a thing has neither happened nor been desired by God, not during the salvation in the exodus nor during the period of the judges. Second (vv. 8–9a), God reminds David of all that he has already done for him and, through him, for Israel. In grace, God took the shepherd-boy and made him prince over Israel. God has been with David, and, as verse 1 of the text has said, given rest and victory over all his enemies.

Third (vv. 9b–11), there will be more than David ever dreamed. David will have a name and a reputation as great as any on earth. Israel will finally have a place of security in which she can live, free from opposition and enemy. And greatest of all, the Lord will establish David’s rule and line in perpetuity; David’s house and David’s reign will endure before God, and for the sake of God’s people Israel, forever (v. 16).

Thus far the promise of this reading is in its OT historical context. Although the appointed lection does not include verses 12–15, these verses are key to the way that the reading shoots out into the future. In the first place, as 1 Chronicles 22:6–10 and 27:6–7 make clear, Solomon is the son of David who begins to enact God’s great plans for God’s people through David’s rule. Yet, as even a cursory knowledge of the history of Israel instantly reveals, Solomon and all of the other Davidic rulers that follow in his flawed and sinful train only highlight the essential truth that this reading is proclaiming: God’s ways are higher and greater than anything mere mortals can imagine, desire, or achieve. God’s people need a prince, a king, one who can shepherd

them and protect them from their enemies in a place that God himself has appointed for them. Neither Solomon nor any other mere mortal can be such a prince.

So in the fullness of time, the greater Son of David comes, and while David has a name with the great ones of the earth, Jesus receives the name that is above every other name. Jesus shares the divine name with the Father and the Spirit. As Israel for a time, in God's economy, dwelt safely in the land, now wherever Jesus is found on this earth, there God's people gather and are rooted and centered in him—even as they look forward to the day when the new heavens and earth become their place of safety forever. Now, the Son of David shepherds us, and, with the authority he has from God because he died for our sins and rose from the dead, he protects us from our enemies, from fear, and from anything that could separate us from the love of God that he has brought into the world. One day, the house of David and the Son of David will be established in all the creation, without remainder. On that day, God's people will still, perhaps, be unable to comprehend the breadth, length, height, and depth of Christ's love, unable to understand that love that surpasses knowledge.

So what is this reading supposed to do for us? For David, the promises of God evoked praise and confidence (vv. 18–29). “Who am I? . . . And your name will be magnified forever!” (vv. 18, 26). Such a response would be a worthy result of a sermon preached on this text. God's ways are higher and greater than our ways. “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.”

*Jeffrey A. Gibbs*

### **Christmas 1 • Isaiah 61:10–62:3 • December 31, 2017**

Sometimes Christians find the prophetic writings strange territory because they seem to be an unending boiling and churning of divine wrath and horrifying judgment. The New Testament seems to be much more familiar territory in terms of knowledge and content. In reality, there is plenty of judgment in the New Testament also—but that's not our topic here. Our topic deals with much more positive, downright spectacular, visions in the prophetic writings of what the future will hold after God's judgment has come (defeat and exile), after God's people repent and look to God again, and when God forgives and establishes his people once again. (Doesn't this simply sound like the narrative form of our dogmatic category of law-gospel?)

Notice how the vision in our pericope jumps from one exuberant image to another. Perhaps the most dominant is the picture of bride and bridegroom, which describes not only the joy in Israel's heart (61:10), but also the renewed relationship between Israel and God (62:5)—no wonder Paul exults on this imagery too (Eph 5:21–33). There is in addition, the joy of new, festive clothing (61:10), the “crown of splendor,” and the “royal diadem” (62:3). God's salvation and his renewing Spirit turns shame and disgrace (61:7) into righteousness (61:11, 62:1–2), which in turn leads “praise (to) spring up before all the nations” (61:11).

In the midst of this splendiferous vision is yet another image, namely the “new

name” mentioned in 62:2 and expanded in 62:4. What follows is a train of thoughts moving from names generally to the “new name” of this pericope to the “name that is above all names” (Phil 2:9) to the name into which we are baptized (Mt 28:19), and finally to the names “written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Rv 21:27).

### **Sermon: What’s In a Name**

A name is a marvelous, mysterious thing. Our name identifies who we are; our name describes who we are; our name determines who we are. Our name and our self are inseparable.

Like the (give examples of surnames in the congregation), I carry a surname too, a name I had—or more correctly, a name that had me—before I was born. A name I was born into . . . a name that carried family identity and tradition from generations . . . a name that brings me into the world in a set of relations and relationship. [Surname] is a name I may carry with pride/embarrassment/resentment, but I do carry it—or does it carry me? A name is a marvelous, mysterious thing.

Like all of you, I also carry a given name. I am not just a [surname] but also a [given name surname]. And the [given name] about me is me in my uniqueness, to mold and shape, to mark identity within the [surname] clan. I can share my [surname] with many, but my [given name] I entrust mostly to special friends, even more so my [nickname].

But I am these two together. My name is not just a username or a password; my name is me, part of me, inseparable from me. Pity the person who suffers amnesia, and can’t remember his name or who he is.

A name is a marvelous, mysterious thing. What a life-changing, revolutionary step it would be for a person to change his/her name. Actually, men don’t often do that, nor do they appreciate what a commitment it is for a woman to set aside her surname and take on her husband’s when they marry. I can understand the reluctance of a woman to set aside who she was as though she is not that person any more. I can also understand the desire of some couples to join surnames, as unwieldy as that can be.

A name is a marvelous, mysterious thing. What an indignity and shame it must have been for Judah when the superpowers of the day (Egypt or Babylon) simply replaced kings at their will and renamed them: Eliakim to Jehoiakim; Mattaniah to Zedekiah (2 Kgs 23:34, 24:17). It isn’t that those names were bad in themselves, but they were imposed by intruders. The kings couldn’t be themselves, but had to be what Egypt or Babylon called them to be.

On the other hand, when the Lord redeems Israel—from slavery and exile, from singing only sad songs by the rivers of Babylon (Ps 137), from being ridiculed, outcast, alien, and hopeless—one of the signs of joy and salvation that he grants them is new names. Gone are the names Deserted and Desolate. The Lord who redeems them gives them not just a name for the future but a name with a future, indeed a name with a present—not a name foisted on Israel, nor a name of ridicule, but a

name given in love and in promise (Is 62:4): Hephzibah (my delight is in her) and Beulah (married, [my] bride)—not catchy names in our day, but easy on the ear and heart for those exiles. Those names are to be heard; Israel’s joy and God’s love are to be seen by “all nations,” and praise will redound to the name of the Lord.

A name is a marvelous, mysterious thing, especially in the hand of God, for God loves to give new names, as he did when he made Abram into Abraham, Sarai into Sarah, Saul into Paul. He instructed Joseph to “give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). The greatest of Christmas gifts is that name above all names, the name at which all knees shall bow, the name “given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). He who gave his life for us gives his name to us. He invites us to be baptized into that name (Mt 28:19). He calls his name upon us, and we bear/name/proclaim/praise/live the name of Christ, a name, a hope, and a joy we could never inherit or make for ourselves. Bearing his name we offer him our birth names, as we offer all parts of our life, to be washed, redeemed, and retooled, and by his grace “written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Rv 21:27).

A name is a marvelous, mysterious thing. Our name identifies who we are; our name describes who we are; our name determines who we are. Our name and our self are inseparable. And we are Christ’s.

*Henry Rowold*

### ***Baptism of Our Lord • Mark 1:4–11 • January 7, 2018***

Jesus Christ, the Son of God—that is who Mark identifies in the opening tide verse of his gospel (1:1). As such, of course, Jesus was in no personal need of the “repentance and the forgiveness of sins” attached to John’s baptism (1:4). Yet, there he is, going down into the water with a crowd of sinners.

It is characteristic of the way Mark tells the gospel story that we, reading the gospel, know more about what is going on than the characters in the story. Mark stated his theme in the very first verse of the gospel, but John, the disciples, the crowds, and the other characters in the story seem to be quite confused about who Jesus is. John himself knows and announces that he is preparing the people for someone else, someone incomparably greater than he is (1:7–8). John preaches and baptizes in anticipation of the greater One, but here is a significant point: Mark gives us no hint that John recognized Jesus at the time of his baptism (or even afterward!). We often read John’s recognition into the baptism text as we have it here in Mark, influenced especially by the parallel in Matthew 3:13–17 (and also John 1:29–34).

Those other texts portray the baptism of Jesus as a very public display of Jesus as the Son of God. But the text as it stands in Mark does not emphasize that public display; in fact, it almost seems like a private revelation. It is Jesus who sees the Spirit descend like a dove; it is Jesus who hears the voice of the Father addressing him as his beloved Son (1:10–11). This and a number of other features in Mark’s gospel are sometimes described as the “messianic secret” (see also 1:25, 34; 43–45; 5:43;

7:24, 36; 8:26, 30; 9:9, 30–31; and 10:48), and are seen by some as a “problem” in interpreting the gospel, especially in comparison with Matthew and Luke.

The “problem” of knowing who Jesus is, of course, exists for the characters in the story, not for us as readers of Mark’s gospel. If the identification of Jesus as the Son of God at his baptism is portrayed almost as a secret, then we are in on the secret. All along the way in his gospel, Mark gives us a privileged perspective on the events he describes. As such, we know and see the events even better than eyewitnesses see. We are told from the outset who Jesus is, while those who saw with their own eyes only gradually, haltingly, and imperfectly began to understand and connect the dots. In the present text about Jesus’s baptism, we see, hear, and understand more clearly than John the Baptist did.

It is tempting to get distracted by the puzzle of harmonizing Mark and Matthew and John, but preaching is not puzzle solving. Reading Mark on his own terms is very helpful. The readers (and our hearers) are “in on the secret” in a way that others in the story are not. John and the bystanders may or may not hear the voice and see the Spirit, but Jesus does, and so do we. Those others may or may not know who Jesus really is; but we do, because Mark tells us in 1:1 who he is. The very act of reading and hearing the story that Mark tells, draws the reader into a particular stance toward Jesus. Jesus is revealed to us readers more clearly and fully than he was recognized by those who walked with him and saw him with their own eyes and touched him with their own hands.

In this light, the crucial thing in preaching the baptism of Jesus is not to sort out all the information—least of all the details of how Mark’s account relates to Matthew’s—but to let the text accomplish with the hearers what the text does to the readers. As Robert Fowler put it, “An utterance means what it does, not what it says” (*Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark*). How does the preacher aim for such an effect? A dramatic turn may capture some of this, with the preacher speaking as one of the eyewitnesses, whose own understanding is incomplete, but whose lingering confusion invites the hearers to fill in the gaps with what we know (but what the eyewitnesses could not).

*William W. Schumacher*

## **Epiphany 2 • John 1:43–51 • January 14, 2018**

### **Context**

Jesus has begun to gather his disciples. John the Baptist’s advertising of this “Lamb of God” has attracted the curious (1:15–37). Simon and Andrew have come to Jesus, and Simon has already begun to experience what it means when Jesus takes over a person’s life. Jesus changed his name, gave him a new identity—even without Simon’s asking (1:37–42). That is what one has to expect when one encounters Jesus.

## Textual Notes

The simplicity of the story in the text is most impressive. The dramatic details are spare. Jesus simply says, “Follow me.” He does not try to persuade or make an attractive offer. He commands. His word creates a new reality. After all, he is the word who in the beginning made all things. Making new, recreating, is just in his blood.

Nathanael’s first reaction to Jesus is the typical reaction of the sinner who wants to remain in charge of life. His prejudiced reaction—nothing good in Nazareth—was a defensive reaction against the claims that could come from the One who really was the One of whom Moses and the prophets had written. Nathanael thought he knew better: no good from Nazareth, and with this judgment he protected himself from Jesus’s call and command to follow, from Jesus’s dethroning Nathanael as lord of his own life.

Then Jesus turned Nathanael’s judgment and life around. It is not clear why Jesus’s seeing him under the fig tree so impressed Nathanael; nevertheless, he was impressed. He decided that Jesus must be the very best that God had to offer. He must be the Messiah, Israel’s King, and that special Son of God that David had been. Nathanael was still trying to be in charge, identifying Jesus and placing this Messiah in his own box. The Lord exploded Nathanael’s noblest conception, that this man was the chosen deliverer from David’s line.

Jesus told Nathanael that that was not the half of it. Without being wrong, he was not right. For Jesus is even more than the Messiah. He is the Son of Man. With this reference to the tradition that goes back to Daniel 7:13–14, Jesus identified himself with that figure in human form who has the characteristics that God alone can claim: “He was given dominion and glory and rule, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, his kingdom one that will not be destroyed.” God was coming in human form, Daniel prophesied, and Jesus claimed to be this one like a Son of Man, who had been described in intertestamental tradition as having angels ascend from him and descend upon him. For that reason Caiphas found him guilty of blasphemy (Mt 26:63–65; cf. Acts 7:56). This image of the angels ascending and descending was combined with the title “Son of Man” against the background of Genesis 28:12, where angels create a picture and place of God’s promise and presence. There God spoke to Jacob from heaven; now God speaks in these days through his Son.

The stark simplicity of John’s telling becomes evident here at the conclusion of the story too. Jesus claims to be God in human flesh, and John follows up with “On the third day there was a wedding.” No pious comment, no fond sentiment can add to the simple claim of Jesus to be our God. We cannot add to or subtract anything from his word as it cuts into the heart of our lives, stabbing our old Adam to death, snipping off the wild growth of unpruned desires, liberating us from the chains of our false conceptions of God and human life, and telling us who is in charge and who we are. Like Simon, we are given a new identity, a new life, and a new way of life; and all that we can do is go to a wedding and live as the new creatures he has made us to be.

## Suggested Outline

Introduction: Nathanael was minding his own business when Philip interrupted his life with word about Jesus.

- I. Like us, Nathanael wanted to be in control. First, his prejudices simply dismissed Jesus: no good from Nazareth. We categorize in this way, as well, to try to stay in charge of life.
- II. Jesus impressed Nathanael, but Nathanael still wanted to be in control. He recognized Jesus as Messiah. Jesus had to tell him that this man from Nazareth was more than an earthly deliverer; he was God.
- III. Jesus is the Son of Man, of whom Daniel prophesied. He is God in human flesh, who brings the presence and promise of God to us.
- IV. Once he has taken control of our lives and given us a new identity in himself, Jesus sends us to serve him in the context of weddings and the other events and situations of everyday life.

*Robert Kolb*

## **Epiphany 3 • Mark 1:14–20 • January 21, 2018**

### Sermon Notes

Like our text, the Epistle for this Sunday (1 Cor 7:29–31) has something to say about time. Paul’s comment that “the time is short” echoes the urgency of our Lord’s announcement, “The time has come” (v. 15)—the only difference being that Paul is speaking of the *quantity* of time (brief), whereas our Lord is speaking of the *quality* of time (special). Our Lord is not discussing a mere chronological unit, “any old time”; the word he uses is *καιρος*, not *χρονος*. *The Good News* version captures the distinction by translating it as “the right time.”

How the fishermen responded to Jesus’s invitation (vv. 18, 20) provides another point of contact between our text and the epistle. Certainly these men would qualify as people “who use the things of the world [e.g., fishing nets], as if not engrossed in them” (1 Cor 7:31). Paraphrasing the language of the epistle, one might describe Simon, Andrew, James, and John as “those who fish, as if they fished not.”

Also like our text, the Old Testament reading for this Sunday (Jon 3:1–5, 10) describes momentous results from simple causes with crisp understatement. Jonah’s message was a simple one: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed” (3:4). The outcome? “The Ninevites believed God” (3:5)! Paralleling this remarkable (but understated) result is the response to Jesus’s simple invitation in our text: “At once they left their nets and followed him” (v. 18). Only the powerful gospel, in either case, could account for such momentous result from so seemingly simple a cause.

The Old Testament reading informs us that “the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time” (Jon 3:1; emphasis mine). Similarly, the call of the Lord to the fishermen recorded in our text is coming to them “a second time,” so to speak. The

encounter in our text was not the first meeting between Jesus and these fishermen; John 1:40–42 describes an earlier contact between our Lord and Andrew and Simon. The fishermen had come to know and believe in Jesus prior to the incident in our text. Lenski suggests that Jesus’s first invitation to the fishermen was intended for their *personal* welfare but that the second invitation (the one in our text) was intended for the *public* welfare; in short, the disciples were to share with others the relationship with Jesus that they themselves already enjoyed. The call in our text is a summons to mission work, not to faith.

Between the temptation of Jesus alluded to in the verse immediately before our text and the incident of our text, there is a gap of over a year. With his customary economy, Mark simply leaps into the Galilean ministry of Jesus. However, while there is no chronological tie between our text and the preceding context, there is certainly a logical connection. No matter how adverse the circumstances—whether it is a temptation in the wilderness from Satan, an encounter with “wild animals” (v. 13), or the imprisonment of a close friend and co-worker (John the Baptist, v. 14)—Jesus’s conduct in our text makes clear that the work of God’s kingdom must go on; its urgency supersedes all other demands.

Note that the preceding and the following contexts provide a frame for our text. In both contexts there is a reference to a demon: the prince of devils, Satan himself, in verse 13; and one of his evil cohorts in verse 23. Given this frame (a common—and effective—literary device), the message of our text comes into sharper focus—even as a portrait is highlighted by the frame surrounding it.

“Repent” in verse 15 has no object, but “believe” has a specific object, “the good news.” We may infer from this syntactical arrangement truths made explicit elsewhere in the Scriptures: (1) Repentance does battle with sin (singular), not merely sins (plural). Sin is a condition we carry around with us, not a mere catalog of evil deeds. We repent, therefore, not merely of the things we do but, above all, of what we are; thus we repent not merely of this or that sin, but we repent—period, with no specific object. (2) On the other hand, believing has a specific object: the gospel, the person and work of Jesus. We are not saved through believing or faith in general, but only through a very specific faith. This is why the text mentions a specific object for faith.

“Believe the good news” (v. 15) should be literally translated “Believe in the good news.” The addition of *in* broadens the meaning. *In* means *in the sphere of*; we “believe in the sphere of the good news.” That is, we believe in the gospel (object) because we are under the influence of the gospel (source). The gospel is not only the *goal* of our faith but also the *cause* of our faith. That is good news indeed! The well-known snowball effect of alcohol might serve as an illustration. The more one is under the influence of alcohol, the more one craves alcohol—and the worse the consequences. Let this negative aspect of alcohol remind us of the positive aspect of the gospel: it too has a snowball effect. The more one is under the influence of the gospel, the more

one craves the gospel—and the more blessed the consequences. “Whoever has will be given more” (Lk 8:18).

Our Lord adapts his gracious invitation to Simon and Andrew to the situation in which he finds them. “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (v. 17) is addressed to the two men as they are engaged in fishing. Be it reverently said, our Lord exploits the situation; he uses a metaphor, “fishers of men,” instead of the more general terms “missionaries” or “evangelists.” (See John chapters 4 and 6 for similar examples.) In his preaching Jesus was “all things to all men so that by all possible means [he] might save some” (1 Cor 9:23—a precedent for us in our evangelism efforts).

Note carefully the wording of Jesus’s promise, “*I will make you* fishers of men” (v. 17; emphasis mine)—not “*You will become* fishers of men.” The accent is on Jesus’s activity, not ours. Whatever good we do, he does in us. We are “fishers of men” only through his strength. Further, the verb *make* seems to imply training. We are not “zapped” into missionaries, but schooled to be missionaries.

*Nets* in verse 18 is an instance of synecdoche, the part standing for the whole. In other words, what Simon and Andrew left behind was more than a specific piece of fishing equipment—they left behind their jobs, their vocations, to become “fishers of men.” Moreover, the Greek verb ἀνεπέβυσσε is an aorist participle, connoting final, completed action; they left their “nets” permanently, for keeps. Nothing casual or ordinary about their action—it was radical!

Note the parallel between the “at once” of verse 18 (describing the fishermen’s action) and the “without delay” of verse 20 (describing Jesus’s action). Urgency characterizes both Jesus’s invitation and the human response to it. Like Master, like disciple.

## Suggested Outline

Introduction: There is no doubt about it: the cause of missions is an urgent one. God takes “no pleasure in the death of the wicked,” but will have “all men to be saved.” “The night is coming when no one can work.” “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.” What is needed for this urgent cause of missions is a corresponding sense of urgency in behalf of the cause—an urgency like that displayed by Jesus and the disciples in our text.

- I. Urgency in behalf of the urgent cause of missions as displayed by our Lord:
  - A. Despite adverse circumstances (vv. 13, 14), our Lord continued to proclaim the good news of God.
  - B. His description of the kingdom of God abounded in urgent language (v. 15).
  - C. When he encountered the sons of Zebedee, he called them “without delay” (v. 20).
  - D. A sense of urgency impelled our Lord toward the climactic acts of his saving ministry (Mt 16:21; Lk 13:31-33, 22:42; Heb 10:7).
- II. Urgency in behalf of the urgent cause of missions as displayed by the disciples:

- A. Called to share in the Lord’s mission activity, Simon and Andrew left “at once” (v. 18).
  - B. Called to share in the Lord’s mission activity, Simon, Andrew, James, and John made a complete break from their former activity (vv. 18, 20).
- III. Urgency in behalf of the urgent cause of missions as displayed by us (?):
- A. Because of our sinful lethargy and our confused priorities, it is predictable that we will not respond with urgency to the urgent cause of missions (the malady).
  - B. The urgency our Lord requires of us, he himself supplies (the solution).
    - 1. The same gospel that is the object of our sense of urgency is also the source of our sense of urgency (v. 15).
    - 2. Hence it is the Lord himself who makes us “fishers of men” (v. 17).

Conclusion: Given the goodness of our Lord who, through the Gospel, enables the sense of urgency for missions that he requires, we can replace the question mark in the parentheses behind the third point in the outline with a period, even an exclamation mark. Empowered by Jesus, we can respond to his urgent call to mission work immediately, wholeheartedly, and completely.

*Francis C. Rossow*

### **Epiphany 4 • 1 Corinthians 8:1–13 • January 28, 2018**

The goal of the person who wishes to achieve everything that there is to achieve in life is \_\_\_\_\_.

How would each of us fill in the blank? According to the Hellenistic philosophers of the Apostle Paul’s day, the pinnacle of human experience, of human existence and achievement, was not faith, hope, and love (“and the greatest of these is love,” 1 Cor 13:13). No, according to Paul’s contemporaries, the goal of humanity was instead *knowledge*. The goal of the truly ascendant, the exemplary, the perfected human person was not love but was instead enlightenment. How narcissistic, how self-congratulatory and self-aggrandizing such philosophies can be in practice for those who make them their own.

Therefore, Paul writes of the pursuit of such things—of that which we all have in common (“we know that we all have knowledge”) but which the Hellenists took to another and alien level. Paul’s response? “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (8:1). To be sure, adds Paul, “If anyone imagines [with the misguided pursuit of knowledge] that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know” (8:2). His pursuits are woefully misdirected. The invariable result of his efforts is bankrupt indeed. “But if anyone loves God,” if anyone loves he who is love and who loved us first, that person shows himself to be one who has been touched, transformed, united to, God in his person, in his very nature. He shows that what

truly is excellent actually has happened to and in his life. For *the* purpose of each and every human person's existence, *the* proper, genuinely fulfilling goal of every human person in this world, is not to know as no one else has ever known but to *be* "known by God" (8:3). For in blessed union with the one who declares, "I know you, I have called you by name, you are mine" (Is 43:1), does one become everything that our God would have us to be, does one become the image and reflection of the one who loved us first.

"Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols" (8:4), writes the apostle, how we should respond in the stead of the one who loved us first, how we should respond to any issue that scandalizes and/or misleads a brother or sister, is clear. "We know that 'an idol has no real existence,' and that 'there is no God but one'" (8:4). In other words, we know that the question of food purportedly sacrificed to a "god" who is nothing more than a figment of the human imagination is really a moot question. Such food offered to a fiction is in reality no different from any other food, and so it neither helps nor harms more than any other food. "For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords'—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (8:5–6). Therefore, rightly understood, the Christian is in principal free to eat or not to eat. It matters not.

"However," cautions Paul, "not all possess this knowledge" (8:7), that is, not all in their walk of faith have a full understanding of such things. Misunderstanding still clings to us all, causing some to view these and other matters in an unfortunate, even harmful, light. So, "some, through former association with idols, eat [and, when they do so, view such] food as really offered to an idol [in other words, to them, to eat is, by definition, to affirm the existence and to seek the favor of the god to whom such sacrifice is given], and [so] their conscience, being weak, is defiled [when either they or a brother eats]" (8:7). "Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do" (8:8). "But take care," warns the apostle, that this freedom and "this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak [that is, if his understanding of what he is seeing is unfortunate], to eat food offered to idols [that is, to see such idols as actual deities to be honored whose favor must be sought]?" (8:9–10). "And so by your knowledge [in the exercise of your so-called freedom] this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ" (8:11–12).

This, urges the apostle, must never be. Therefore, "if food [or any other matter of Christian freedom] makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat [that is, I will refrain, even when I otherwise am free], lest I make my brother stumble" (8:13). For

that which is preeminent is that which God is. “Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love (1 Cor 13:13). Therefore, concludes the apostle, “let all that you do be done in love” (1 Cor 16:14).

*Bruce Schuchard*

### **Epiphany 5 • Mark 1:29–39 • February 4, 2018**

The season of Epiphany is about the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and the texts of the season relate in various ways how Jesus Christ shows himself to us and to the world. And so, in this Epiphany season, one question we always bring to texts is, “What does Jesus show us about himself—about God—here in this text?”

This reading from Mark’s Gospel (Mk 1:29–39) falls in the middle of a three-week sequence in which a long section of the first chapter of the gospel is included. The series begins with the exorcism in the Capernaum synagogue (fourth Sunday after Epiphany) and concludes with the dramatic account of Jesus who is willing and able to both touch and cleanse a leper (sixth Sunday). In the middle comes this present text, with Jesus healing both privately and publicly, exorcising demons, praying alone, and preaching throughout Galilee.

The healing of Simon’s mother-in-law may count as a more or less “private” act of healing, both in the sense that Jesus healed her of her fever in Simon and Andrew’s house with only a few disciples present, and also because the results or effects of the healing were not public or obvious. In fact, the picture is of the woman being instantly and miraculously cured, and then returning immediately (one of Mark’s favorite words!) to the simple, mundane tasks of housekeeping and hospitality. The healing ministry of Jesus restores ordinary human lives of service. The people he touches are not freed from their human responsibilities or relationship. On the contrary, Jesus’s touch removes everything which damages or obstructs our human lives of service.

The focus of the narrative in Mark is never on the striking miraculous nature of the healing itself, or other miracles. The way Mark tells the story, Jesus seems intent on keeping both his healings and his victory over demons as quiet as possible. Thus, when the crowd gathers at the house in the evening, and Jesus heals many and exorcises demons, he does not permit the demons to speak. It is, of course, rather remarkable that Jesus is known and recognized for who he is by the evil spirits but not (often in Mark’s Gospel) by Jesus’s own disciples. But it is also worth noting that Jesus commands those demons to be silent precisely “because they knew him” (v. 34). One gets the distinct impression that Jesus is not at all interested in creating a high profile public stir!

The same impression is reinforced in verses 35–38, as Jesus withdraws from public view and finds a quiet, lonely, and uninhabited place to pray by himself. When Simon and the others come and find him, they seem to urge him to return to the crowd who are now looking for him. But Jesus says instead that his path lies

elsewhere: to those who have not yet heard his preaching.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that Mark's grammar seems to spotlight the brief exchange between the disciples and Jesus in verses 37–38. The switch from the aorist tense of the general narration to the present tense is usually not captured in English translations, and its exact significance is hard to define. The effect of Mark's use of the present tense in narration might be compared to a close-up shot in a movie, and it adds a subtle but distinct emphasis to this bit of dialogue.

Why is this little exchange placed in the foreground and brought to our attention in this way? Because here the disciples' idea of what Jesus should do is contrasted vividly with what Jesus himself says his mission and purpose are. Simon and the others have seen the favorable response of the people in Capernaum, and think Jesus should continue to build on this promising beginning. Jesus knows that his purpose is in another direction, namely to preach to and serve those who do not yet know him.

The phrase Jesus uses to describe his purpose and mission is somewhat unusual, and deserves attention. The ESV renders it, "for that is why I came out," but a more literal translation of *of eis touto gar exelthōn* might be "because for [or into] this I came out." It is not immediately clear what is meant by "come out" in this context. Possibilities include "coming out" of Capernaum to this remote place (cf. the use of the same word in v. 35), so that Jesus is explaining his secretive departure from the crowds in the village. It is tempting to associate Jesus's word here with a statement from John's gospel: "I came [out, *exelthōn*] from God" (8:42), in which case Jesus is making a much more profound assertion about the purpose of his whole ministry. It may not be necessary to choose between these options, since each step of Jesus's ministry of preaching and healing aims toward that for which the Father sent him—and that road leads to Jerusalem, to the cross, and finally out of the tomb. We listen carefully—and help our people listen—when Jesus tells us what he is doing and what he came for.

*William W. Schumacher*

## **Transfiguration • 2 Corinthians 3:12–13 (14–18); 4:1–6 • February 11, 2018**

### **Literary Context**

The text is part of 2 Corinthians where Paul is defending the integrity of his apostolic ministry and his past actions in dealing with the believers in Corinth (1:12–7:16). In the section immediately preceding today's text, 3:7–11, Paul contrasts the ministry of Moses in mediating the Torah to Israel to Paul's own apostolic ministry of proclaiming the lordship of Jesus Christ. Both ministries are characterized by glory, but where Moses's ministry was a ministry of death (3:7), Paul's is a ministry of the Spirit (3:8). Where Moses's ministry was a ministry of condemnation, Paul's is a ministry of righteousness (3:9). Where the old covenant mediated by Moses

is being abolished and superseded, the ministry of the gospel of Jesus will remain forever (3:11). The reader/hearer should thus appreciate being a recipient of the new covenant as proclaimed by Paul.

### **The Text**

Verses 3:12–13: The “hope” (ἐλπίδα) to which Paul refers in 3:12 is the hope in the enduring/remaining glory mentioned in the previous sentence (3:11). This is the glory associated with the new covenant. This hope motivates Paul to behave very boldly/frankly/openly (παρρησία) in his ministry. Paul then contrasts his conduct with Moses’s wearing the veil as described in Exodus 34. Commentators do not agree on the particular point Paul is making about Moses’s purpose in wearing the veil. One explanation is that it was to hide from the people how the glory would gradually dissipate from Moses’s face, and then that Paul is suggesting a connection between this and the impermanence of the old covenant. Whatever the purpose of the veil, Paul argues that Moses’s wearing the veil implies that he was concealing something and so it contrasts with Paul’s own openness.

Verses 3:14–18: Paul next uses the figure of the veil to discuss Israel’s present unbelief. As the people of Israel could not see Moses’s face because of the veil, so their minds remain hardened and a veil covers their hearts today as they hear the old covenant read. Only in Christ is this veil abolished (3:14) and only in repentance is it removed (3:15). Note Paul’s important hermeneutical point that apart from faith in Jesus Christ there can ultimately be no proper understanding of the Torah.

Verses 4:1–6: Paul continues defending his apostolic ministry in terms of its openness: Paul has “renounced the disgraceful secret ways” and refuses to “act with deceit” or to “falsify the word of God”; he instead commends himself by the open manifestation of the truth (4:2). He does not preach himself, but Jesus as Lord and him, Paul, as his servant (4:5). Throughout this pericope Jesus’s lordship has this important implication: God’s people are now led by the Spirit and so are no longer obliged to live under the letter of the Torah. Because Jesus is Lord, the old covenant is no longer in effect.

Paul again uses the imagery of the “veil” to explain unbelief: Those on the road to condemnation are blinded by the god of this age and so do not see the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (4:3–4). The solution for such “blindness” is in the open proclamation of Jesus Christ through which “light would shine out in darkness to affect enlightenment” (4:6).

### **Considerations for Preaching**

Paul discusses the cause of unbelief with the image of “the veil,” an image where faith is likened to seeing and so unbelief is blindness. The proclamation of Jesus then functions to remove the veil and to enlighten the darkness—and thus enabling the blind to see. Because of this, Paul stresses the importance of conducting his

ministry with openness/boldness. What is (and should be) openly proclaimed is that Jesus Christ is Lord. He has initiated God's reign of salvation on earth and will bring this work to completion on the last day. Those who believe in Jesus receive the Holy Spirit, are given the hope of eternal life, and are justified before God the Father.

As Paul uses this image of the veil to describe what happens with unbelievers when they hear God's word, this image should not be directly applied to believers today as if they are still impeded by such a veil. Rather they are those who have been saved from such unbelief through the proclamation of Jesus Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This last point is good news for those who believe and should be preached this way.

Paul's apostolic ministry found its motivation in the eschatological hope of the permanent and enduring glory. This "glory" was initiated already in Jesus's ministry. It is manifested in part today in the work of the Holy Spirit among God's people. This hope will ultimately be fulfilled when Jesus makes all things new on the last day. And so it is while we are mindful of the end goal that we are called to be faithful to the gospel today.

Unfaithful ministry is characterized by the use of deceit, cunning, and twisting the word of God to attract a following, sometimes then with the goal of promoting the (so-called) ministers rather than devotion to Jesus Christ. Faithful believers should be warned against such "ministers" and "ministries." Paul proclaimed Jesus as Lord not for profit, power, or self-interest, but for the enlightenment and salvation of those who hear.

*David I. Lewis*

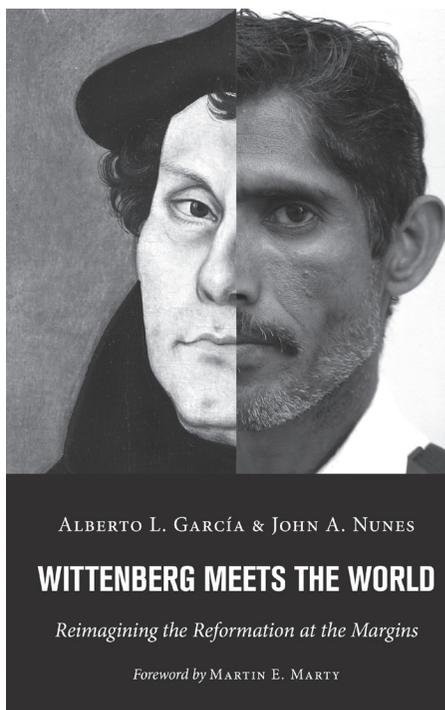
# *Reviews*



**WITTENBERG MEETS THE WORLD:  
Reimagining the Reformation at  
the Margins.** By Alberto L. García and  
John A. Nunes. Eerdmans, 2017. 208  
pages. Paper. \$22.00.

As Philip Jenkins once put it, the center of Christianity has now shifted from the North Atlantic to the Global South. The same reality applies to world Lutheranism. The largest Lutheran university in the world is in Brazil, and the fastest-growing Lutheran churches are in Africa. Yet theological reflection on the Reformation heritage from Luther's relatively new heirs is only slowly coming out of Africa, Asia, or Latin America and the Caribbean. As diaspora movements have shown, formerly colonized or occupied peoples are in many cases contributing to societies in the lands of their former colonizers or occupiers. Diaspora people are also revitalizing churches in the increasingly secularized or declining churches of their evangelizers in the faith, imbuing them with new evangelistic zeal, renewed commitment to service in the world, and theological insights. Enter Alberto García and John Nunes, children of the Cuban and Jamaican diasporas, pastors and theologians who have made North America their home and place of ministry and teaching for many years, and whose theological insights in *Wittenberg Meets the World* constitute an eye-opening reimagining of the Reformation from a marginal diasporic lens.

Placing justification by faith at the center of their constructive project, and using the framework of the church's life



of witness (*martyria*), service (*diakonia*), and communion (*koinonia*) in the world, the authors argue for a holistic, non-dualistic reading of key insights from Reformation teachings, which—as they put it in their preface—“have been stifled by the proclamation of a disembodied Gospel” (xvii). This collaborative project is organized around eight chapters, four by each author. In chapter one, García offers an integrative view of justification that does not only address individual sin by declaring the guilty forgiven before God but also becomes effective or transformative in a communal sense by reconciling people to each other. In chapter two, Nunes develops a catechesis that deploys the rich interplay of justification and justice to recognize the effects of structural sin in the world and

promote a renewed commitment to the amelioration of human suffering. Calling for the adoption of a Reformation *sola agape dei* (García's term), the author calls for an unmasking of idols that replace the priority of trust in God's love in Christ for allegiance to other structures of power (e.g., a sacralized idea of the nation state), which in turn promote violence towards vulnerable neighbors (chapter three). Appealing to the church's prayer for the Holy Spirit to bring God's kingdom in our midst, Nunes makes the case for God's "creative disruption" in our lives by bringing us to repentance and making us witnesses who tell the truth in a world filled with false takes on reality (chapter four).

In the next four chapters, the authors focus primarily on *diakonia*. García argues for a cruciform view of service that does not foster a utilitarian view of neighbors as means to an end such as the dying church's preservation, but instead promote walking together with them in their sufferings (chapter five). Nunes shows how the separation of service, witness, and life together promotes one-sided views of neighbors (e.g., service without *koinonia* often leads to paternalism and dependency), and shows how an integration of these aspects of the church's life fosters two-way relationships where partners work *with* each other in God's mission (chapter six). In chapter seven, García argues that communion in Christ does not only point to an individual's confession of Christ's real presence in the sacrament but also effects a communal way of life in the world in which we share each

other's burdens and celebrate the hope of the eschatological *fiesta* in the here and now. In the final chapter, Nunes asks us to imagine an ecclesiology that allows for a salutary difference that is neither monocultural nor posit diversity in opposition to the common dignity of the human family and, moreover, can be proclaimed when either extreme threatens the church's catholic identity in the world.

The book raises important questions about Lutheran identity and commitment in an increasingly globalized Christian (and Lutheran) world, and in particular the place of social and ecclesial location in the theological reading and practical deployment of Luther's works, Reformation confessional documents, and contemporary theologians. Given the highly individualized and dualistic view of life and thought in the Global North, one finds a breath of fresh air in the authors' interpersonal and integrative framing of Reformation theology. It should be noted that, in García's and Nunes's reimagining task, social location does not usurp the textual tradition of the Reformation but actually opens up its rich treasures to us. In doing so, the authors suggest that some partially eclipsed aspects of Luther's much broader vision need retrieving, and thus invite us to look at the sources and fruits of Luther's Reformation with fresh eyes. I highly recommend this book to students of Luther, the Reformation, and the intersection of Lutheran theology and Global South people's struggles, aspirations, insights, and

practices. As a bonus, the book includes an appendix with questions on each chapter for discussion and reflection in academic and ecclesial settings.

*Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.*

**DICTIONARY OF LUTHER AND THE LUTHERAN TRADITIONS.** *Edited by*

*Timothy J. Wengert. Baker Academic, 2017. 880 pages. Hardcover. \$59.99.*

Some volumes on my bookshelf are more useful than others and I believe that this *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions* will be one of my most consulted. The appropriate audience for the book would be those interested in the broader picture and interesting details of the Reformation, without being burdened by too much depth. One should not be fooled, however, by the relative brevity of information on any given topic, as the scholarship employed is first rate. The list of contributors, from the general editor on down, is a veritable who's who of important people in Luther research and other relevant subject areas—so what is published in a short space is highly valuable.

What makes this book so important? First it is relatively compact for such an extensive topic. This allows a quick reference or a taste of given subjects that can lead to further research. To aid in projects, brief bibliographies of important sources are given after many of the articles, so not only does one have information on the person or topic involved, but also a place to continue studying. Furthermore, the selection of topics is well chosen and not narrowly

confined to the more traditional Reformation period. There are articles, for example, on major figures and events from American Lutheranism and many articles on the expansion and progress of Lutheranism in various national contexts. Even smaller nations, such as Peru, and their Lutheran pasts are represented.

In addition, the *Dictionary* covers major schools of interpretation that have been essential to the development of Luther research. Major scholars receive brief articles exploring their important contributions and the interpretations they have of the Reformation. By this means, it is possible to get the interpretative or historiographic picture of the period and its subsequent offshoots.

The political side of Lutheranism is also given due consideration, with major church leaders covered as well as ecclesiastical movements. Under the topic of American Lutheranism, for example, there are articles on subjects such as the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches.

It would be helpful to have some of these movements tied together in some accompanying outlines. The subject index, at the back of the book, is certainly a start in this regard but would be enhanced by putting together some of the broader subjects so that they could be seen in their broader organization. For example, social movements arising from the Reformation would be an interesting broader outline, as would political movements. Another possibility would be the release of a searchable electronic version of the book.

Of course, the contributions and articles on the main events and development of Luther's thought during the Reformation are highly useful as well, and there is no lack of content or emphasis in these areas. If one wants to have on their shelf a useful, scholarly reference that covers the time period of the Reformation itself and its context and subsequent development, this would be such a work. I highly recommend it for students, pastors, and interested lay people. I would also recommend it for the reference sections of libraries, both academic and public. In addition, Baker Academic Press is to be commended for producing such a high quality hardbound volume at such a modest price point—currently listed at under 60 dollars (a spot check shows it can be found for less)—allowing such scholarship to fit into most budgets.

*Timothy Dost*

**LUTHER AND THE REFORMATION OF THE LATER MIDDLE AGES.** *By Eric Leland Saak. Cambridge University Press, 2017. 393 pages. Hardcover. £90.00.*

There is no shortage of new publications on Luther from respected scholars commemorating the quincentennial of the Reformation. In most cases, these somewhat more popular books draw from the author's less-accessible academic works. Eric Saak's *Luther and the Reformation of the Later Middle Ages* fits within this category. Saak has written numerous volumes on the late medieval Augustinian tradition, to which Luther belonged as a member of the order of

Augustinian Hermits. Consequently, he places the reformer in the context of this Augustinian tradition, first at Erfurt and then at Wittenberg, where Luther was deeply involved in the order's affairs, immersed himself in the writings of Augustine, and often identified himself in correspondence as "Brother Martin."

The premise of Saak's book is that Luther began his career as a proponent of late medieval reform—a movement he terms the "Reformation of the Later Middle Ages." This reform movement emphasized internal, personal change, or what Saak calls "religionization." The majority of monastic orders shared in this goal of religionization or reform, and Luther as a member of a more rigorous, "observant" wing of late medieval monasticism had a commitment to the same thing. This proves important for Saak's presentation of Luther because he believes we must understand Luther's career prior to 1520 as an expression of this late medieval reform tradition, not of a more definitively "Lutheran" Protestant Reformation.

To make this case, he distinguishes between Luther's "tower experience" and his "Reformation breakthrough"—two things often grouped together as Luther's "(re)discovery of the gospel." For Saak, Luther's tower experience, where he came to understand justification by faith, occurred as early as 1514. It would only later crystallize into the Pauline doctrine of justification and the certainty of salvation we associate with his mature thought. But his view as of 1514 was in no way incompatible with the late medieval reform tradition or with

medieval theology as a whole. Luther finally broke with the Reformation of the Later Middle Ages in early 1520, when he rejected the medieval view of papal authority and identified the pope as the Antichrist. This rejection of the papacy signaled the end of the late medieval reforms and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

Saak develops his argument over the span of eight chapters. The first two place Luther's early career in its monastic context. Chapter one addresses late medieval reform, how it influenced the monastic orders, and how it took shape among Luther's Augustinian Hermits. Chapter two deals with the distinctive theology of the late medieval Augustinians, Luther's formation within that tradition, and his early knowledge of Augustine. The next three chapters trace Luther's theological development on a number of topics. Chapter three examines the tower experience and Luther's ambivalence toward Aristotle, chapter four explores Luther's relationship with the medieval theological tradition on questions of reason and faith, and chapter five compares Luther's maturing view on justification with that of his Augustinian tradition. To this point, Saak still places Luther within the parameters of late medieval reform and medieval theology. The remainder of the book shows how and where Luther departed from it. Chapters six and seven follow Luther's evolving view of the papacy from his early lectures through the indulgence controversy, his break with Rome in 1520, and the fallout. Chapter eight concludes the

book by looking at the outworking of the Reformation and the inability of the structural reforms it produced after 1520 to address the deeply personal, interior questions raised by the Reformation of the Later Middle Ages—questions, Saak says, that remain with us today.

This book is not for the faint of heart. It has a scholarly rigor that the garden-variety biography or introduction to Luther does not. Saak is at his best bringing his knowledge of late medieval Augustinianism to bear on Luther's context and development. For instance, he points out that the Augustinian Hermits were under pressure from Pope Leo X to reform or risk losing their independence as a monastic order exempt from episcopal authority. He believes Luther's earliest theological arguments may have failed to register with an ecclesiastical leadership that was otherwise consumed with a battle for the reform and independence of the order. Saak also raises anew the question of Luther's relationship to the Augustinian theological tradition, but he offers a surprising conclusion: Luther was likely not a very good Augustinian, had not been formed sufficiently within the Augustinian tradition, and came to his knowledge of Augustine on his own while teaching at Wittenberg. Saak repeatedly cites from his own works on late medieval Augustinianism and draws on his intimate knowledge of that tradition to make better sense of just how Luther's theological conclusions were informed by it or were at odds with it.

At times, Saak's idiosyncratic take on certain issues can be distracting for the

reader more familiar with the customary presentations of Luther. I would argue, though, that his conclusions are more right than wrong. This volume is a needed contribution to Luther scholarship because it provides essential context for understanding Luther's continuities and discontinuities with late medieval reform and theology and gives us a more nuanced picture of his monastic past. The book may not translate well for those without a specialist's knowledge of the late Middle Ages or the Reformation. The parish pastor would be better served reading biographies penned by Reformation scholars, like Scott Hendrix's *A Visionary Reformer* or Andrew Pettegree's *Brand Luther*. Serious students of Luther and the Reformation who may not have significant exposure to the Augustinian tradition or to late medieval church history, however, are much the worse for not reading Saak's new contribution closely.

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**THE WORD DOES EVERYTHING: Key Concepts of Luther on Testament Scripture, Vocation, Cross, and Worm. Also On Method and On Catholicism. Collection of Essays.**

*By Kenneth Hagen. Marquette University Press, 2016. 474 pages. Hardcover. \$25.00.*

Kenneth Hagen emerged from the seminar of Heiko Augustinus Oberman at Harvard Divinity School in the

heyday of North American Reformation scholarship that spanned a quarter century from the mid-1960s into the late 1980s. He served as one of the most prominent and enduring of the Protestants who were named to Roman Catholic faculties at major universities in the Vatican II spring of those years. His mark on Reformation scholarship rests not only in his published work but also in the doctoral advisees he supervised, including several from The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. A certain Norwegian querulosity provoked and stimulated other scholars to helpful exchanges over significant elements in Luther's theology, and behind his Nordic earnestness the twinkle in his eye betrayed a clever sense of humor and the joy that comes from engaging the reformer's texts. His Minnesota formation in the Lutheran ethos combined with his skills developed in Oberman's seminar to produce finely honed essays that lay out the operation of Luther's mind as it encountered both the biblical text and the late medieval German context.

His argumentation could be over-meticulous, but his analysis of vocabulary—"don't call Luther a 'monk'! He was a 'friar'"—called attention to subtle shades of meaning that brought benefits for my own work. I have not always accepted his findings, for instance, in his sharp critique of Gustaf Wingren's work on vocation, but Hagen has always forced me to take another look. His caution against the pitfalls of exclusive dependence on modern editions rather than original printings, in his careful

assessment of the Weimar Ausgabe of Luther's writings, has not prevented me from using the WA, but it has made me more careful in my use of it.

Hagen's most important contributions come in the area of the history of late-medieval and early-modern biblical exegesis. His sorting out the approaches of the medieval monastic tradition, scholastic commentators, and the biblical humanists to Scripture (as sacred page, sacred doctrine, and sacred text) provides a helpful schema for assessing what we find in the works of those in the Wittenberg school of exegesis. In addition to supplying such a larger view, his narrowly focused studies—from that on Luther's judgment that every person is a liar, in commenting on Psalm 116, or on Christ as worm, to Nils Hemmingsen's contribution to defining a method in exegesis—have opened up new perspectives and questions for students of Luther and his contemporaries. This volume presents this and much more. The last two of the two dozen essays collected in this volume let readers into Hagen's thinking as a theologian of the church catholic with his assessment of the state of European Christianity and his reflections on his sojourn as a Lutheran among the Roman Catholic colleagues with whom he worked.

Hagen's departure from this life in 2014 left a gap among those who engage Luther. This collection of essays is a welcome and helpful addition to the monographs he wrote as a series of monuments of his scholarship.

*Robert Kolb*

**RECLAIMING CONVERSATION: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age.** By Sherry Turkle. Penguin Press, 2015. 436 pages. Hardcover. \$27.95.

This is not a book about pastoral theology or even theology in general, but reading it can inform, motivate, and bless pastors and their ministries. In a nutshell, the theme of the book is *empathy*, explaining how to get it and use it in families, education, and the “public square.”

*Alone Together*, Turkle's previous book, provides the setting for this one by describing how electronics can inhibit building meaningful relationships. People often sit together (at a restaurant, athletic event, or even in a congregational gathering) but alone (mentally and emotionally apart from the group) reading or texting on a cell phone.

In *Reclaiming Conversation*, Dr. Turkle teaches or reminds us that through conversations, “in person, we have access to the messages carried in the face, the voice, and the body” (23). We reveal our personality, attitude, and values through facial gestures, inflection of voice, spontaneous unedited choice of words (unlike editing an email or text) and other personal mannerisms while relating to other people also by the ways they communicate. Social media, on the other hand, “instead of promoting the value of authenticity, encourages performance” (109).

This monograph can remind pastors that an email or text conveys objective data but a personal conversation or pastoral call better conveys personal empathy and faith. This carefully

researched book gives many thought-provoking insights and statements that pastors can use to help themselves and others build meaningful, empathic relationships that support sharing the good news of love and salvation in Jesus Christ.

The book also illustrates and supports the motivation and importance of the curriculum revision at Concordia Seminary. As a statement in the Concordia Seminary, St. Louis “FAQ on the curriculum revision” explains, “the [new] curriculum . . . focuses on a student’s personal faith, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness.” What that entails should promote meaningful conversations.

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**PAUL AND THE GIFT.** *By John M. G. Barclay. Eerdmans, 2015. 656 pages. Hardcover. \$70.00.*

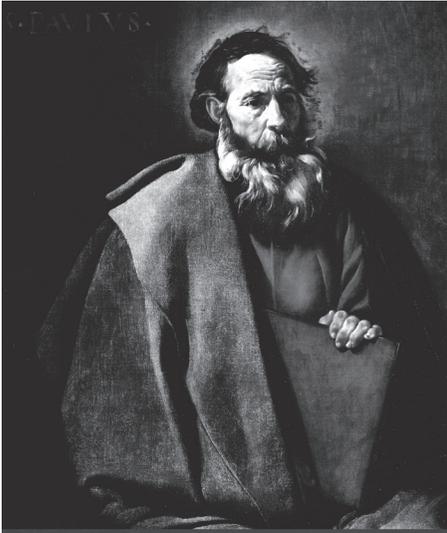
Long books on Paul are no surprise lately, but long books of this quality and magnitude are. Over the years, Professor Barclay has been authoring shelves of careful research on ancient Judaism, Paul, and the concept of “grace.” All this and more is brought to *Paul and the Gift*, and readers should expect far more nuance from Barclay’s treatment than this brief review.

Paul speaks often of God’s work in Christ with the overlapping terms “grace” and “gift” (note the preponderance of *charis* and *dōrea* in, for instance Romans 5:15), but what does this mean? Barclay sketches six features that have become

almost definitions of the concept. For some, “grace” must be *superabundant* (if it’s not big, it’s not grace). Others stress its *priority* (a gift given prior to any worthiness). Others emphasize *incongruity* (the recipient is undeserving). For some, grace must be *efficacious* and achieve its intended purpose. Most common today is *non-circularity*: for a gift to be a gift, it must come with no expectation of return.

Barclay brilliantly creates some definitional distance between modern and ancient viewpoints. Paul’s world knew of giving without any contractual demands or obligations. Gifts were, importantly, part of social bonds, given to create and strengthen relationships, and often carried expectations of reciprocity. Relatedly, of course, to whom one gives gifts becomes important (cf. Luke 6:32–36). Are they worth the gift? Will they receive it properly or respond appropriately? Will they squander the gift? From a more philosophical angle, is it even just to give gifts to those who will only throw them away? Importantly, for a giver to give to a “fitting” or “worthy” recipient does not lessen its being a “gift.” If I give pearls to someone whom, I expect, will wear them rather than eat them with hummus, it is still a gift, but it is a “congruous” or “fitting” gift.

Turning to *divine* grace in a few representative early Jewish texts, Barclay finds variegated characterizations of God’s “grace.” That grace is prior is often assumed—efficacy and non-circularity less often. Regarding congruity, Barclay shows disagreement. Some emphasize



## Paul & the Gift

JOHN M. G. BARCLAY

their unworthiness of grace. Others, while not believing they have “earned” God’s goodness, hold God to retain equity with mercy and understand grace to be given to recipients who are somehow fitting. An important takeaway here: “grace is everywhere in the theology of Second Temple Judaism, but not everywhere the same” (565). The now-middle-aged “New Perspective” on Paul argued that Judaism was a religion of “grace,” quite correctly against portrayals of all ancient Jews as crass Pelagians. But this does not mean, as some argued, that Paul’s talk of “grace” must have included no difference (or critique) of unbelieving Jewish theologies.

Barclay now turns to offer a reading of grace in Galatians and Romans. Paul’s definition of grace, he finds, assumes

its priority and emphasizes especially its fundamental incongruity. Barclay understands the “gift” as the Christ-event itself (e.g., 566). Christ died for us not only before we were worthy but when we were in fact his enemies: “no fitting features can be traced in the recipients of God’s love, not even in their hidden potential” (477). Even faith in Christ—Barclay’s reading of the debated *pistis Christou* in Galatians 2:16, and so on—is only a fitting response, but not a criterion in view of which God gave the gift (379, 382–384).

Especially distinctive is the way in which this becomes *programmatic* for Paul’s theology and mission. The fact of radically incongruous grace determines, for example, how he reads Scripture and the identity of God’s people: rather than reading God’s election of a worthy (or even expectedly worthy) people, Paul tells Israel’s story in terms of God’s constant gifting without regard to “works” or any criteria of worth (e.g., Rom 9:10–13; 11:5–6). Incongruous grace also, in Paul’s mind, must determine the shape and ethos of God’s graced people in Christ: regard for worth or potential value cannot stratify persons who are equally unworthy before God and who have equally received the same incongruous gift. This applies especially, in his polemics, against criteria his contemporaries found in the Mosaic law (esp. circumcision), but also to other conventional valuations: “Ancestry, education, and social power are subordinated to a common ‘calling’ that disregards previous assumptions of worth (1 Cor 1:26–31)” (567). The latter point

is especially significant in view of the fact that grace, while thoroughly incongruous, is *not* non-circular or completely singular for Paul. Unworthy recipients of grace are then called and brought (by the work of God's Spirit) to live "worthily" of the incongruous gift they have received (e.g., 1 Thes 2:12), which will be evident at the final judgment (440–441). Grace, in this way, is expected to create a "fit" between the (always) unworthy recipients of the gift and the Giver.

Barclay's book is extremely important within Pauline studies and repays consideration by pastors and theologians. It does not resolve every theological question about grace, of course. The *crux theologorum* remains, and Barclay's treatment might have been strengthened by the (Lutheran) notion of "faith" not only as a spiritual "declaration of bankruptcy" (383) but also as the means of reception or participation in Christ. Likewise, Barclay rightly emphasizes that the "fit" this incongruous grace creates between its recipients and God must take shape in communities whose ethos challenges and disregards human worth-criteria. This is certainly to the fore in Galatians and Romans. But Paul also believes his congregations must "fit" and reflect God's character in other ways, such as a *holiness* that befits the Spirit who indwells the community (a main theme of 1 Corinthians). Future reflection on the church's duty to imitate both divine incongruity and divine holiness might stimulate further fruitful reflection on the drama of grace, grace's effects, and divine judgment that Barclay has so

deftly studied in this book. I highly recommend it.

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**THE ECUMENISM OF BEAUTY.** Edited by Timothy Verdon. Paraclete Press, 2017. 128 pages. Hardcover. \$28.99.

*The Ecumenism of Beauty* is a collection of essays offered with the hope that the "shared admiration" of beauty might be fecund ground for fruitful ecumenical dialogue in commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation (v). In these short, but incisive, essays, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant theologians and artists offer a start to this conversation.

Timothy Verdon's introduction observes that tensions over images, not only between Roman Catholics and Protestants, but also between East and West, have long been a topic of conversation. Within his own Roman Catholic tradition, he argues that both the sensibilities of sacramental and verbal concerns work together (xii–xiii). This is further demonstrated in his concluding essay on the visual aspects of the liturgy.

Jérôme Cottin and William Dyrness offer correctives and hopeful suggestions for the place of beauty in the Reformed tradition. Cottin argues that Calvin was not against images per se but devotional images (1–3). Provocatively, he asserts that though Luther's influence led to the measured retention of ecclesial art according to its didactic value, Calvin's legacy produced more significant

artists (e.g., Rembrandt, Van Gogh, and Mondrian). That is, art was still a charged subject that drove Reformed artists to explore God's creation (landscapes), daily life (genre and still-lives), and non-representational aesthetics (geometric abstraction) (6–9). Dyrness points to Calvin's instructions to lock the church doors outside of service times as a means of turning people outward toward God's sovereignty over the beauty of creation; simultaneously, he laments that this emphasis has also locked out much of the medieval church's beauty (14–19). However, because many Protestants have sought to retrieve and modify some medieval practices, Dyrness hopes that this might signal the reintroduction of some of the medieval, visual beauty associated with these practices. More study is needed on the preservation of visual art in Lutheran churches following the Reformation and the fact that the Cranachs virtually stand alone, far above other distinctly Lutheran visual artists. However, one might also see fruitful areas of further conversation. Historians have observed that Lutheran churches tended to preserve medieval styles, sometimes even in contrast to the Roman Catholic embrace of the baroque style with the counter-Reformation. The popular argument that Lutherans were merely concerned with didacticism is too simplistic of an explanation for this development.

Other entries in this collection include Susan Kanaga's and Filippo Rossi's descriptions of their practices of creating abstract sacred art and Martin Shannon's description of the liturgical

marriage of naturalistic, iconographic, and abstract styles in the Community of Jesus's Church of the Transfiguration in Orleans, Massachusetts.

Situated in the middle of these essays, however, is Greek Orthodox art historian Vasileios Marinis's consideration of Fotis Kontogolou, whose position bristles against any easy "ecumenism of beauty." Kontogolou believed that the "worldly" naturalism in the art of Roman Catholicism was opposed to the "spiritual" iconography in Eastern Orthodoxy (43). While Marinis grants that Kontogolou's enthusiastic position may present problems, he notes well that the understanding and function of "art" in the East and the West are radically different (45).

At times, these vignettes leave the reader wanting more of a conclusion or proposed answer to the questions being asked. But in some sense, this is the nature of conversation around the difficult-to-define term of "beauty" (with or without the capital "B"). This book is meant as a starting point, and it is bound to initiate some conversation about both commonality and difference in Christian art. For Lutherans in this 500th anniversary year, any discussion of beauty will center on the One through whom all things were made: Christ, born of Mary, crucified, risen, ascended, and coming again *pro nobis*.

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*Risen Savior Lutheran Church*  
*Byron, Illinois*

**RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS: A Life in the Public Square.** By Randy Boyagoda. Image, 2015. 459 pages. Hardcover. \$30.00.

How is it that a dyed-in-the-wool Lutheran pastor turned Roman Catholic priest could be selected by *Time* magazine in 2005 as one of “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals” in America? An “incorrigibly and confusedly religious nation” is the way Richard John Neuhaus (RJN) liked to describe us. Randy Boyagoda, in his biography, finds another answer in Neuhaus’s “life in the public square,” where he was convinced that the moral foundation of America’s democracy made ongoing religious input an essential ingredient for our life as a nation. He argues that for RJN, it was never a question of *whether* religion and politics came together, but *how*. To this end, moreover, RJN consistently sought to position himself as a religious leader, including the cultivation of personal relationships with presidents and popes. As early as 1976 in his book *Time toward Home*, RJN stated that he expected to meet God as an “American,” as one “who tried to take seriously, and tried to encourage others to take seriously, the story of America within the story of the world” (383).

Perhaps equally important questions regarding RJN involve his major identity shifts over the course of his public career. Reared in a Missouri-Synod Lutheran parsonage in Pembroke, Ontario, he followed in his father’s footsteps to the St. Louis seminary and

from there became a successful urban pastor in Brooklyn and influential leader within the larger Lutheran family of denominations. RJN chose to become a Roman Catholic in 1990 and was ordained as a priest a year later. Boyagoda views RJN’s movement toward “Rome” as gradual, one that led him to become, as he himself put it, “the Catholic I was.” Contributing to this process were the positive experiences he had with Roman Catholic boyhood friends and the mentorship of seminary professor Arthur Carl Piepkorn, who helped him examine Lutheranism in its wider liturgical and catholic context. More importantly, RJN came to see his synod’s Seminex crisis and the subsequent Lutheran identity debates that followed the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in 1988 as evidence of Lutheranism’s declining influence in America. “Rome,” therefore, simply provided a much larger “public” platform for him to promote his vision of the necessary role of religion in the nation’s politics.

Boyagoda also traces the key steps in RJN’s political shift over time from left to right. During the 1960s RJN became a staunch activist in the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam movements. Like Martin Luther King, Jr, he saw these causes as a moral challenge to America as a nation. But following King’s assassination and the tumultuous Democratic National Convention of 1968, and then his own decisive defeat in a congressional primary, his eyes were opened to the flawed aspects of the movement’s agenda for the country,

and he soon found himself less able to position himself within its ranks. He saw hypocrisy in the Left's placing of nature ahead of human rights in its ecological pronouncements about overpopulation and in its support for the *Roe v. Wade* decision (1972) regarding abortion, even as it continued to champion the rights of the poor and the racially oppressed. RJN endorsed the Hartford *Appeal for Theological Affirmation* (1975) because he believed the Christian Left had uncoupled its agenda from any real sense of the transcendent, and more particularly from the gospel's revelation of Christ as Son of God and Savior of the world. After the defeat of "born-again" Christian president, Jimmy Carter, RJN moved into Republican circles, where Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush were especially receptive to his counsel.

Following his conversion to Catholicism, RJN helped to broker *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (ECT), a social conservative coalition for the purpose of re-establishing religion's role in America's public life through robust opposition to abortion and euthanasia and advocacy of school choice and a vibrant market economy. Once he had established himself in the 1990s as the editor-in-chief of his own widely-circulated *First Things*, however, his commentary became increasingly strident and controversial, leading to resignations from the journal's board and ruptures in some of his close relationships. Nevertheless, in Boyagoda's view, he remained true to his goal of bringing theoconservative principles to bear on America's politics and governance.

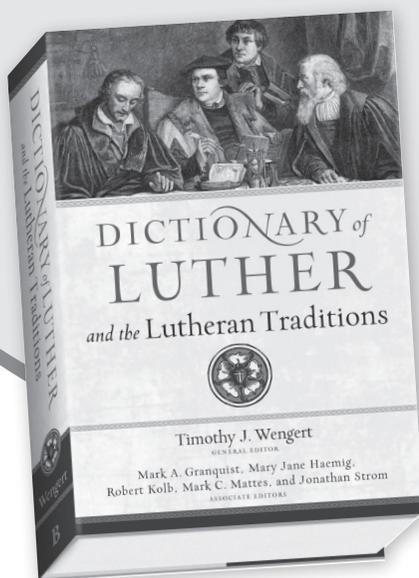
As a biographer, Boyagoda provides us with the complete story of RJN's life from his upbringing on the Canadian frontier of the 1930s to the days of his death and memorial service in 2009. His findings are based largely on interviews with many people associated with RJN, as well as RJN's public and personal papers. He also helps us interpret each of RJN's books by examining their contemporary context. Strangely missing, therefore, is a more extended discussion of *The Naked Public Square* (1984), the book for which RJN is perhaps best known. Boyagoda's missteps in probing the complicated world of late-twentieth-century Lutheranism are few, but include a confusion of the ELCA with the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), the break-away group from the Missouri Synod that RJN joined following its Seminex crisis (217, 281), and his erroneous designation of ELCA theologian Robert Benne as a "fellow Concordia Seminary graduate" (201). Finally, this same biographer does not spare his subject from the rod of criticism. He calls attention particularly to RJN's penchant for having the "last word" in every debate and for his "expansive, at times, excessive, self-reference" (315). However, he balances doubts about RJN's claims of friendship with Martin Luther King, Jr, with more credible evidence of RJN's close ties to Pope John Paul II and President George W. Bush. More telling is Boyagoda's inclusion of Stanley Hauerwas's wry estimation of RJN as one who was less inclined than he was in post-9/11 America to make a clear choice between

“Jesus” and “Washington” (354).

Beyond the recounting of the story of its subject, a biography can be useful for other historical purposes. Boyagoda’s telling of RJN’s odyssey gives us valuable insights into the more conservative trajectory that American politics and religion assumed following the tumultuous decade of the 1960s. It also sheds light on the debate about the role of religion in the nation’s politics over which Americans remain divided. Of value as well are his contributions to the more recent North-American histories of Lutherans and of Roman Catholics, two denominational families in which RJN was able to play a truly important role.

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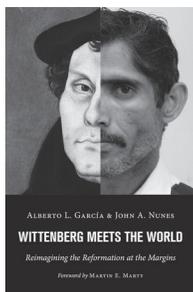
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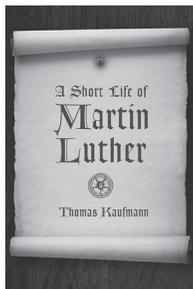
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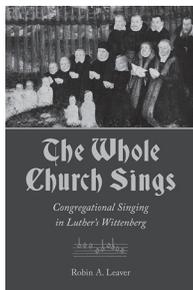
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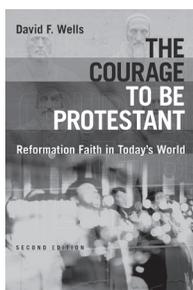
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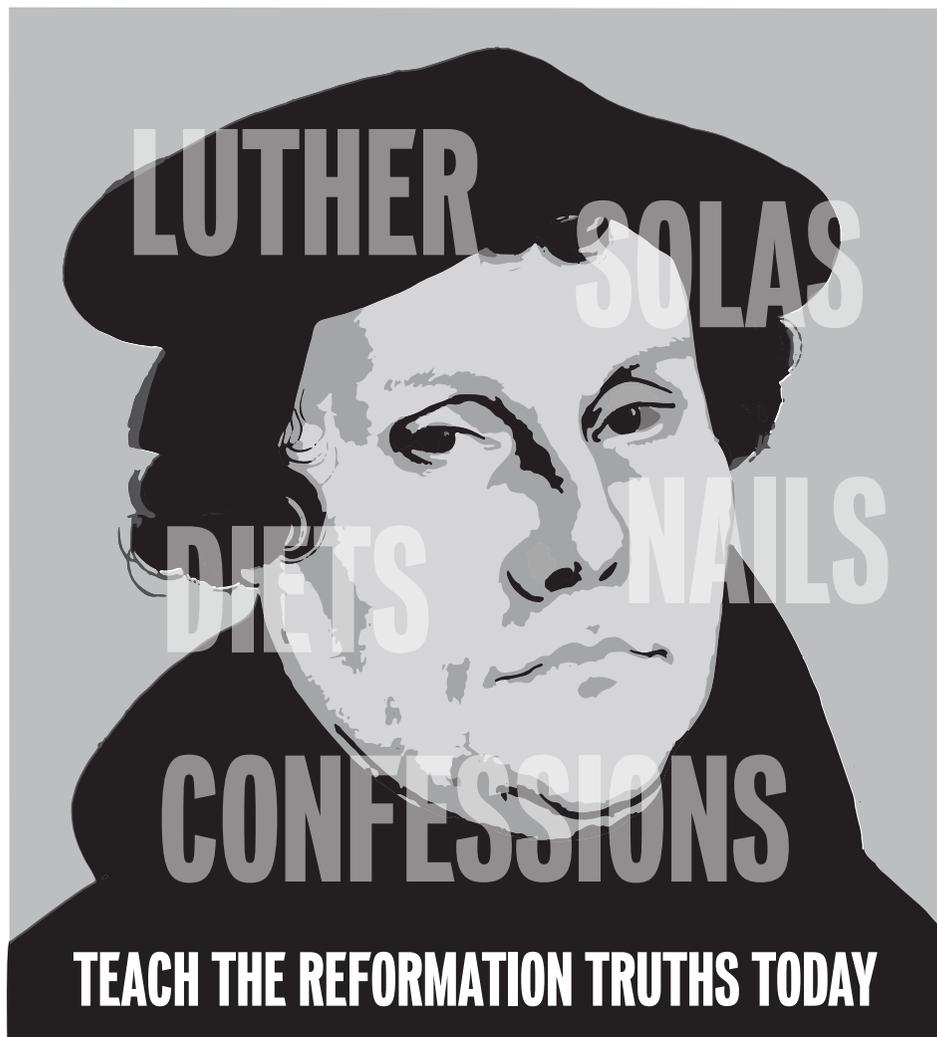
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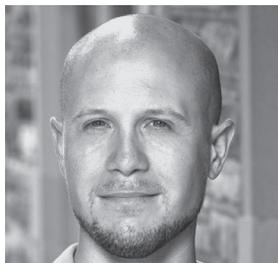
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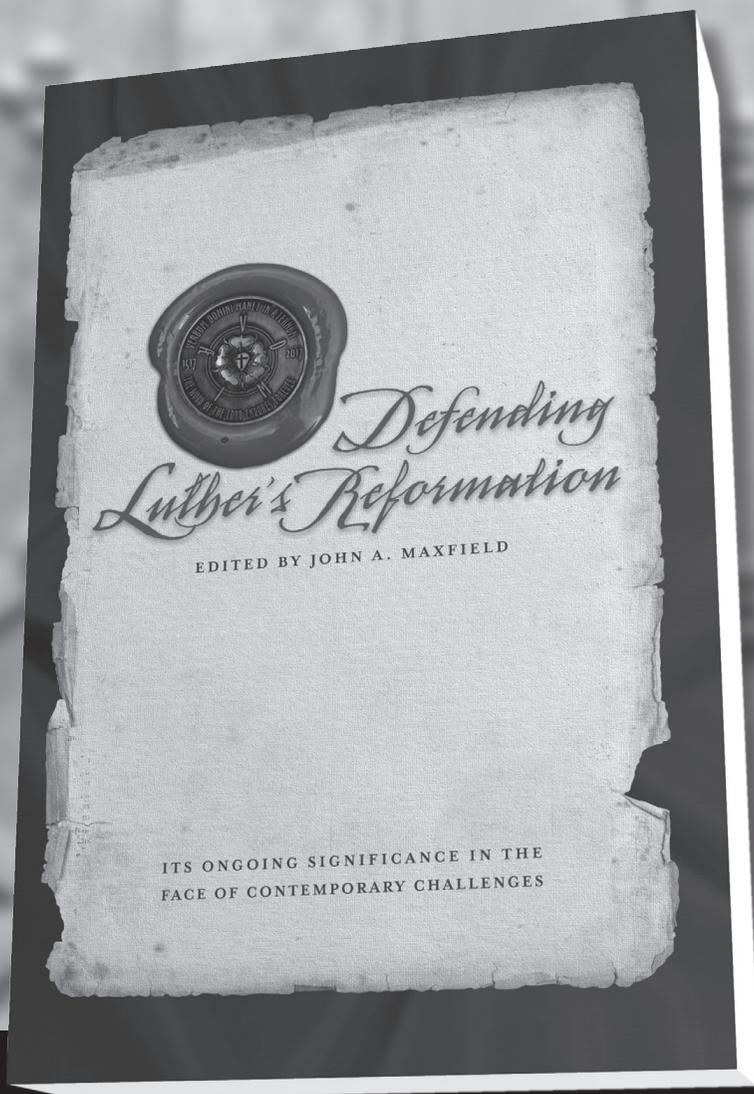


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