

FALL 2018 | VOLUME 44 | NUMBER 4

concordia journal



On the cover: In conjunction with the 2018 Theological Symposium, Concordia Seminary held an art exhibition curated by local artist Sarah Bernhardt. Kurt Caddy's "The Arc of History" (2017) presents an abstract photo of a section of concrete pavement, which he then digitally colored. About this artwork, Bernhardt writes: "Kurt Caddy fills his canvases with colorful explosions. Caddy photographs ordinary and even mundane images of places that feel worn, broken, or unresolved, such as this bit of pavement.... He then uses colored, powdered pigments or digital editing to transform these small scenes into abstract pictures of beauty, wonder, and metaphor. Caddy comments that the image with the pavement explores the idea of the 'cross being the focal point of history. Everything leads to it and everything flows from it.' This piece of sidewalk speaks to our own moment in history and story of place and presence." More of Kurt Caddy's work can be viewed at www.instagram.com/fourwindsfineart.

Issued by the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, the *Concordia Journal* is the successor of *Lehre und Wehre* (1855-1929), begun by C. F. W. Walther, a founder of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. *Lehre und Wehre* was absorbed by the *Concordia Theological Monthly* (1930-1974) which was published by the faculty of Concordia Seminary as the official theological periodical of the Synod.

Concordia Journal is abstracted in *Internationale Zeitschriftenschau für Bibelwissenschaft und Grenzgebiete*, *New Testament Abstracts*, *Old Testament Abstracts*, and *Religious and Theological Abstracts*. It is indexed in ATLA Religion Database/ATLAS and Christian Periodicals Index. Article and issue photocopies in 16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm, and 105mm microfiche are available from National Archive Publishing (www.napubco.com).

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The *Concordia Journal* (ISSN 0145-7233) is published quarterly (Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall). The annual subscription rate is \$25 (individuals) and \$75 (institutions) payable to Concordia Seminary, 801 Seminary Place, St. Louis, MO 63105. New subscriptions and renewals also available at <http://store.csl.edu>. Periodicals postage paid at St. Louis, MO and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *Concordia Journal*, Concordia Seminary, 801 Seminary Place, St. Louis, MO 63105-3196.

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A Concordia Seminary St. Louis Publication



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Editorials

Editor's Note

A number of demographic studies have come out in the past couple of years that deal with various sociological trends within the church at large and in the Missouri Synod in particular. They provide a snapshot of the current state of the church as perceived by those who participated in the surveys. They are eye opening, sobering, and a bit discouraging.

One of the more comprehensive and sobering is the study conducted by George Hawley at the request of the LCMS.¹ In his introduction to the study, Heath Curtis, Coordinator for Stewardship Office of National Mission—LCMS warns, “The results are bracing.”

- The Synod has lost more than 1 in 5 baptized members since the peak membership in the 1970s.
- Every single district has lost membership over the past decade.
- Half of that decline has happened just since the year 2000. [250,000 people over a ten-year period, p. 38].
- We closed 1 in 10 of our elementary schools in just 5 years (2008–2013).
- We baptize only about one-fourth of the children we baptized in the 1960s.
- In fact, we now have more adult confirmations than infant baptisms.
- The Synod is only growing in counties where the overall population is growing—and even there, it is growing more slowly than the county’s rate of growth.²

There is much to digest in the report. One point that is relevant to this issue of the *Concordia Journal* is this remark: “It appears that as the public culture becomes more secular, and private life becomes more idiosyncratically “spiritual,” religious organizations are competing against one another for pieces of a shrinking pie.”³

And then there are the millennials. Mark Kiessling, Director of LCMS Youth Ministry and his team have looked at the retention rates of young adults among LCMS churches and have indicated what works and what does not work. His article in the following pages expands upon aspects of his office’s report “Retention of Lutheran Millennials: 2017 LCMS Study of Young Adults,” released in January 2018. Of special interest are the many comments by those who are no longer members of the LCMS. I suspect this is not limited to millennials. One hears from pastors about how baby boomers, who have been life-long active members, now attend once every four to six weeks.

Of course these trends are not unique to the LCMS. We are part of a profound

cultural shift taking place within America. One of the consequences of that shift is documented in Robert D. Putnam's important and exhaustive work, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon and Schuster, 2012). He points out that many if not most people now choose their church based upon their politics rather than basing their politics on their church. Studies, such as David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins's *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011) and Barna Trends 2017: *What's New and What's Next at the Intersection of Faith and Culture*, show that how the church (as an institution) deals with a variety of cultural issues often alienates many young adults.

We begin by taking a look one of the studies mentioned above. Mark Kiessling shares with us his findings and analysis along with some comments made by young adults. Many millennials are experiencing what philosopher Charles Taylor calls the "cross-pressure" of life as a believer in the modern world. Kiessling's work raises tough questions about our attitudes toward younger adults. Do we take their concerns arising from "cross-pressures" seriously? Do we equip them to be leaders within the congregation?

Sociological studies such as Kiessling's are helpful in providing access into what people think and experience at a given moment in time. They take the temperature of society and culture. But one's temperature is an indication or symptom of underlying health or illness. Studies such as Kiessling's help to identify the *symptoms* of a much larger and long lasting intellectual undercurrent that shapes our view of the world and our place within it. One might think that the disease is individualism, consumerism, or pluralism, but these are just the symptoms of a deeper problem. Yes, we must ease them much as we would put a cold compress on a fevered head, but that does not cure the underlying infection.

What we face today ultimately requires a theological analysis and response that addresses questions that many of our forebears would have thought unthinkable. Charles Taylor expresses this shift well in *A Secular Age*. He notes that at the dawn of the sixteenth century it was unimaginable that one would not believe in God or in some transcendent power and force that governs the world. But why is it that in "modern western society religious belief is no longer a forgone conclusion but rather one way of life among many others"?⁴

Joel Okamoto argues in his article that we are witnessing today the full flowering of nihilism that has become such a normal part of everyday life that we take it for granted.⁵ What does that mean? In brief, normal nihilism means that belief in God is no longer a given. God no longer inspires awe or fear in the average person. Belief in God has become a choice. And one chooses to believe in God because God is useful and helpful for dealing with the stresses of life . . . at least for now. Okamoto's article provides a helpful description and analysis of normal nihilism along with suggestions for witnessing in both the culture and the church.

In the meantime, our congregations, schools, and institutions are experiencing

the impact of this normal nihilism in direct and visible ways from the loss of Christian influence in the culture to declining membership and budgets. How we deal with that stress is important for moving confidently and creatively into the future. As just one practical example, Jeff Gibbs follows up his popular online article on anger with further reflections here on the Christian life in an age of online outrage.

As Christians, we live by faith in a promise—a promise given us by one who has been raised from the dead and appointed the Lord of creation. “Behold, I am making all things new.” And when God makes all things new, he does so out of nothing, that is, by his omnipotent freedom. As Luther puts it, “this is the proper office of God.”⁶ You might say that is God’s *modus operandi* for all of God’s work. Consider Luther’s magnificent confession to that point in his commentary on Mary’s Magnificat.

Just as God in the beginning of creation made the world out of nothing, whence He is called the Creator and the Almighty, so His manner of working continues unchanged. Even now and to the end of the world, all His works are such that out of that which is nothing, worthless, despised, wretched, and dead, He makes that which is something, precious, honorable, blessed, and living. On the other hand, whatever is something, precious, honorable, blessed, and living, He makes to be nothing, worthless, despised, wretched and dying [reduces to nothing . . . judgment] . . .

He also cast His only and well-loved Son Christ into the depths of all woe and showed in Him most plainly to what end His seeing, work, help, method, counsel, and will are directed. Therefore, having most fully experienced all these things, Christ abounds through all eternity in the knowledge, love, and praise of God;

Here, too, belongs Psalm 44, 7, 8, where it is said that all the saints will nothing in heaven but praise God, because He looked upon them when they were in the depths and there made Himself known to them and was loved and praised by them. (LW 21, 299–301)

This is how it has always been. Think about the case of Abraham, or a little-regarded people known as Israel, or an adulterous king, or an exiled people, or a timid and rag-tag group of disciples. We may be entering precisely a time when God creates something new out of the nothingness of nihilism and emptiness of secularism.

Charles P. Arand
Dean of Theological Research and Publication

Endnotes

- 1 *Journal of Lutheran Mission, Special Issue*, December 2016. <https://blogs.lcms.org/2016/journal-of-lutheran-mission-december-2016>. For an analysis of this study see William W. Schumacher, “Demography and Mission in the LCMS: A Response to Journal of Lutheran Mission, December 2016,” at https://www.lsfm.global/uploads/files/LMM_5-17_Schumacher.pdf. For a critique and response by Pastor Curtis, see: blogs.lcms.org/2017/synod-demographic-studies-offer-insight-despite-critiques. See also George Hawley, *Demography, Culture, and the Decline of America’s Christian Denominations* (Landham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017).
- 2 Heath Curtis, Introduction, *Journal of Lutheran Mission, Special Issue*, December 2016.
- 3 *Journal of Lutheran Mission, Special Issue*, 90.
- 4 <http://www.liberal-evangelical.org/index.php/reviews/recent-and-relevant/145-a-secular-age-by-charles-taylor>. See also Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 5 See James C. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism* (State College, PA: Penn State University Press, 1997).
- 6 “Et eius officium proprium, quia est deus: ex nihilo omnia.” WA 40(3); 90.9f. See Bill Weinrich’s excellent article, “Creation ex Nihilo: The Way of God” *Logia* 4, no. 2 (April 1995): 37–42.

“The Beams and Lintels Trembled at the Cry and Clouds of Smoke Enwrapped the Throne on High”

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”*

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me!” For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” (Is 6:1–8)

Isaiah chapter 6 begins with a theophany. Isaiah has a vision of God. He sees the heavenly throne room, and he hears the heavenly insiders, the cherubim, cry, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.” And the heavenly throne room—which is a God-friendly place; it is, after all, his throne room—shakes. “The beams and lintels trembled at the cry and clouds of smoke enwrap the throne on high.” Imagine the beams and lintels of this chapel—and we imagine that this is a God-friendly place—imagine these beams and lintels shaking at the physical sight and sound of God’s holiness. If this building began to shake, we would imagine an earthquake and we would flee. Imagine that the shaking is the manifestation of God. “Man shall not see me and live” (Ex 33:20). “Woe is me!

Editor’s note

President Meyer preached this sermon based on Isaiah 6:1–8 for the opening service of Concordia Seminary’s 180th year.

For I am lost.” Does Concordia Seminary have a vision of the holiness of God that shakes us out of our status quo, shakes us out of our theological and ecclesiastical routineness, shakes us out of our spiritual smugness? *More personally*, do you have a vision of the holiness of God that shakes you down to the depth of your being?

You aspire to leadership, earthly leadership, in the church of God. You don't know what you're getting into, any more than I did when I came to the Seminary forty-nine years ago. “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (Jas 3:1). Ministry in this sinful world grinds us down, often cruelly. This grinding down is a strange blessing because we see more and more; “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” The law is holy and good. Don't imagine that the gospel permits you to put the law behind you. It is my prayer that you will see the law of God in your daily formation for ministry, law which will shake you as much as an earthquake would make the beams and lintels of this building tremble. But then comes the seraph with the grace of the burning coal. Then comes to you the Spirit of crucified and risen Christ and says, “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” Concordia seminarians, shaken and touched by the Spirit of the Lord Jesus . . . Concordia faculty and staff, shaken and touched by the Spirit of the Lord Jesus . . . So shaken, so touched, the only response we can give is “Here am I! Send me.”

Send us where? Send us to whom? Does the transforming touch of holiness send us to Germans who settled in nineteenth-century America? Does the forgiveness that touches our unclean lips send us mainly to white America? Does it send us to “Christian America” where everyone has some nominal understanding of Christianity? When you say, “Here am I! Send me,” are you looking forward to a country-club maintenance ministry? “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Is 49:6). Concordia Seminary is a seminary of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Its biblical and confessional doctrine is our doctrine, and we prepare pastors and deaconesses for this Synod that we love. But that is too small a thing when we have been shaken to the depths of our being and transformed by the holy touch of God's forgiveness. In what I'm saying there is a practical program. To keep it short, in these next years Concordia Seminary needs to first, add people of color to our residential student body and to our faculty. Second, we need to promote our graduate school to people in other denominations who are disaffected by liberal, shallow, and non-biblical theology. And third, we need pastors and people in the pew to clamor for our relevant and timely resources for ministry and mission. When Isaiah said, “Send me,” he was not accepting the status quo. He was eager for the future. Holiness shook him to woe, but the forgiving burn of holiness transformed him for mission. Concordia Seminary cannot accept the status quo. Our Lord Jesus bids us

go to the world the way it is today. So it is my prayer that this 180th academic year will shake us and send us into the future with confidence and cheerful courage in the good news of God.

“And clouds of smoke enwrapped the throne on high.” In the Old Testament, smoke regularly was present at a theophany. There was fire and smoke at Mount Sinai, during the wilderness wanderings, here in Isaiah chapter 6, and many other times. There still is theophany today, theophany through the word of faith. Jesus says, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). The poet John Geyer puts it this way.

We know that Christ is raised and dies no more. Embraced by death, He broke its fearful hold; And our despair He turned to blazing hope. Alleluia!

We share by water in the His saving death. Reborn, we share with Him an Easter life as living members of a living Christ. Alleluia!

The Father’s splendor clothes the Son with life. The Spirit’s power shakes the Church of God. Baptized, we live with God the Three in One. Alleluia! (Lutheran Service Book, 603)

“The beams and lintels trembled at the cry, and clouds of smoke enwrapped the throne on high.” Be shaken, be touched, be transformed by the holying Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dale A. Meyer
President

Remembering Professor William Schmelder

Those were tumultuous times, and William Schmelder was one of those who answered the call of God through his church to pull up stakes, leave an active parish ministry, and move to faculty row at Concordia Seminary for the fall of 1974, helping to fill the void left in the wake of the “Seminex” walkout and to begin to rebuild the seminary. Like everyone in those days, Pastor-now-Professor Schmelder put on multiple hats: instructor in various departments, registrar, chaplain, student and faculty academic advisor, and all-around “do what needs to be done.”

His own academic work had prepared him well: a BD, back when that was optional, followed by an STM in 1960. His work on the Altenburg Debate and the conflict between Walther and Löhe was important and foundational. Then came parish ministry at various posts, from St. Charles to Fort Wayne and from Covina, California to Casa Grande, Arizona. God’s gift of Helen LaDelle Behnken, daughter of John W. Behnken and known as Delle, was a true blessing, both as a life partner and in her paternal link to a pastor’s heart and churchman who was already dealing with a growing controversy surrounded by increasing politics. His clear, firm, but pastoral witness continued even after he left the office of synodical president.

Bill needed little encouragement toward his own strong convictions, and he had his own combination of clarity, strength, and pastoral concern in confronting issues of theology, church, and ministry. His classroom asides, never off the point but applying the issue at hand to contemporary issues at hand with incisive wisdom, sharp wit, and sometimes barbed criticism, helped earn him the moniker “Wild Bill” among affectionate students.

For me, as a young faculty colleague who worked with him for many years, Bill was a source of guidance and mentoring, strong opinions, and good humor. An almost daily post-chapel debriefing in my office brought insight and wisdom, grounded in theological substance, salted with humor, and spiced with seasoned critique.

An historian by training, his knowledge of LCMS and American Lutheran history and theology ran deep. It was also timely in navigating the landmines of that generation, and I’ve often regretted the absence of his insight and wisdom into how we as synod have journeyed into the next generation, as often apart as walking together. He knew Walther, and his reminder that the intentional order of *Kirche und Amt* (church, and [within it] ministry, not ministry and then church) was a key insight that remains relevant in today’s discussions.

He also taught homiletics and pastoral theology, and he modeled them in

leadership as chaplain and in his own preaching, always textual and properly dividing Law and Gospel. He was influential in remaking Hom I for that time, grounded in Walther's *Law and Gospel* as well as *Church and Ministry* and the pastoral office. As a young instructor in Old Testament prophets, I still appreciate his descriptor of "authoritative discourse grounded in the Word of God for the salvation of souls..."

Students came first, though some may have questioned that from experiences in the registration line. His booming voice announced the closing of a section with hints of sadistic pleasure in reordering students' plans. But pastoral formation was the reason the church had

a seminary, and that included the inculcation of both confidence and humility. He didn't suffer fools lightly, and his healthy suspicion of those who found pride in piling up knowledge, real or presumed, served as a check and balance between the academy and the church, between academics for their own sake and pastoral care and concern that included those both within and without the church and its message of salvation in Christ.

His life also extended beyond the seminary. His family can attest to that. He took seriously his vocation as husband and father, sharing appropriate pride in his children and profound grief in the loss of daughter Lynn. His own struggle with an ongoing illness that, as he would say with a little wry celebrity, "stumped the Mayo clinic" provided an additional sense of *Anfechtung*. Yet it strengthened his deep understanding of the theology of the cross over against the fallen realities of this life, from profound sorrow to superficial whining over what Franzmann called, in one of Bill's favorite lines, "those puny cares."



William Schmelder (1933–2018). Credit: scholar.csl.edu

He served the church-at-large in various ways, as author, speaker, and assistant to President Bohlmann, first in the latter's role as seminary president and then as synodical president. His Bible Class teaching at Immanuel, Olivette, went on for years after retirement from the seminary faculty and became another part of near-legendary lore. He loved theologically rich hymnody, especially those of Martin Franzmann, and penned several of his own, including "Light from Above," based on the seminary motto. His final contribution brought him full circle to his roots, his love for Delle, and his respect for John Behnken as pastor, churchman, theologian, preacher, and father-in-law. His "Postscript" to the republishing of *This I Recall* (CPH, 2018) has brought to renewed life the insights and wisdom of that era that can serve us well in the present and into the future generation.

Our dear friend and colleague Bill concluded that Postscript with the poignant prayer, "Lord, let at last Thine angels come." Now they have come also for William J. Schmelder. We rejoice for baptismal life confirmed into eternal life, for the blessings of God to and through his servant William, for comfort and peace to Delle and their children and grandchildren, and for all whose lives he touched with the power of God's Word of Law and Gospel for the salvation of souls. Another line from one of his beloved Franzmann hymns, grounded in the text of Jeremiah 1:18 and 15:20 and cited also in the funeral sermon for this child of God, both strong and frail, is a fitting, final tribute:

O speak to us Thy Potent Word, that we may say "Thus says the Lord." That in our frailty we may be, a wall of brass that echoes Thee.

Well done, good and faithful servant.

Andrew Bartelt

Articles

The Search for Young People

2017 Research of Millennials and the LCMS

Mark Kiessling and Julianna Shults



Mark Kiessling is the director of LCMS Youth Ministry. In that role, he supports the leadership, service, resourcing, and networking functions of LCMS Youth Ministry. Kiessling

is a graduate of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and holds a bachelor's degree in business administration from Concordia University, Portland.



Julianna Shults serves LCMS Youth Ministry as Program Manager for Lutheran Young Adult Corps. She received a degree in psychology along with her DCE certification from Concordia University, Nebraska. She earned a Master's degree in Social Justice and Community Development from Loyola University, Chicago.

“Why aren't millennials in the church?” In the past decade, this question has been voiced in genuine concern, with evangelistic passion and as a hopeless lament. LCMS Youth Ministry hears this question nationally, in districts, from LCMS congregational leaders, pastors, and church workers with good reason. Statistics point to nearly two-thirds of millennials leaving the church for at least a short time after high school along with a steep rise of nones, those claiming no religious affiliation. It is evident that millennials, those aged 22-37¹ in 2018, are not engaging with the church like earlier generations.

What is the answer? As millennials aged, several narratives developed to explain why they were more likely to be seen at a local park or sporting event

than worship on Sunday morning. Some narratives are based in documented cultural shifts, like the move from rural areas to urban. Others are based on individual stories of engagement (or disengagement) within a congregation. Still other narratives are based in pop culture stereotypes or Pollyannaish optimism. As LCMS Youth Ministry attempted to find more definitive answers, we sought insight from the research of

Pew, Barna, and the Fuller Youth Institute. Yet we wondered if data from a Lutheran lens and with a larger LCMS sample size would provide different answers. Without concrete data of our own, the fear was millennials would pass from the LCMS completely without us ever knowing why. If this were to happen, what would keep Generation Z in our pews?

Our research began by studying annual LCMS reporting statistics. These numbers showed that annual total baptisms and junior confirmations decreased significantly from the Baby Boom (baptisms peaked in 1959). At the same time, a decreasing “retention” rate could be observed by comparing junior confirmations totals over a decade after baptisms took place. The reported numbers showed the percentage of baptized babies making it through junior confirmation had decreased from a high of around 90% right after World War II to a low of under 50% in recent years. (90% may be inflated as Synod’s reporting accuracy was less reliable in those days.)

The start of our answer is in lowered baptism numbers coupled with lower retention rates starting with baby boomers (born roughly 1943–1965). The lowered retention of boomers led to fewer infant baptisms. *Current numbers show half of those baptized are confirmed, and thus a vast canyon is created between the number of Millennials in the LCMS and the US population.* (This rift is seen not just in the LCMS but other Christian denominations as well.²) Millennials had not *left* the church; they were never there to begin with.

These numbers can feel defeating, but there is more to the answer. A generation defined by events like 9/11, sexual scandals in the church, and the economic crisis of the late 2000s will hold different views and priorities than other generations. They have seen and made changes to corporate culture, social institutions, and church bodies. Yet within this generation are many faithful Christians, holding tightly to word and sacraments. Even millennials who have walked away are connected enough to share their experiences and thoughts with the church. This highly connected and technologically inclined generation may hold the answer.

Most importantly we cannot give up because these are young adults whom Jesus loves. Millennials are children, sisters and brothers, nieces and nephews whom we love, even as they have left the church, or at least the LCMS. We search for why they are no longer in the church because we want millennials and the generations to stand firm in the gospel of Jesus Christ. LCMS Youth Ministry partnered with LCMS Research to conduct an unprecedented study of Millennial retention in the LCMS and in the larger Christian church. The goals for reporting on the data is three-fold:

- Give church leaders a better understanding of Millennial retention in the LCMS,
- Help inform the church on how it can better minister to today’s Millennials,
- Identify potential areas where the church can improve retention for future generations.

Overview of the Study

The research team consisted of:

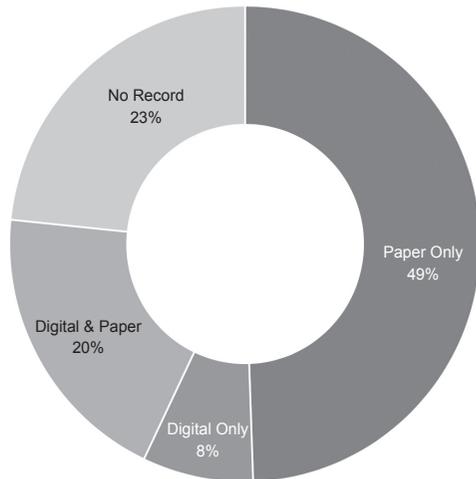
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- Mark Kiessling, Director, LCMS Youth Ministry
- Dave Rueter, Associate Professor of Christian Education, Concordia University, Irvine
- Julianna Shults, Program Manager, LCMS Youth Ministry

In April and May 2017, 1800 congregations were surveyed in the first phase of research. The congregations were chosen in a random sample with a ratio designed to reflect the size and location of the LCMS overall. The survey contained questions about the congregation and specifically on the confirmation classes of 2004–2006. Assuming the standard confirmation age of 12–14, these confirmands would now be 23–27 years old.

Of those invited to take the survey, 184 congregations replied. This lower than expected response was due in part to the exceptional lengths we asked congregations to go to find the data we requested. Still this pool was large enough to obtain helpful data across a variety of congregational locations and sizes. Information about retention is additionally limited by the fact that nearly a quarter (23%) of the congregations surveyed did not have useable records from those years.

Respondents were typically the pastor (86%) or another church worker. Many of the pastors at the congregations today were not working at the congregation a decade ago, so respondents were encouraged to recruit help from staff or parents who might know more about these young people. Still, over a third (35%) of all surveys were filled out by a pastor who was not at the congregation in 2004–2006 and who had no assistance from anyone who was present at that time.

In July through October of 2017, we conducted our second phase of research, an online survey of millennials. The survey took between 15–20 minutes to complete and



asked about their life, family, current faith practices, and theology. The questions were designed to apply to both active LCMS members and those who grew up LCMS but have since left. Those who had left the LCMS were given additional short-answer questions.

Social media and relational connections were utilized to reach as many millennials as possible. It was hoped that our social media outreach would provide enough responses from active LCMS millennials to determine the leading indicators of retention. To reach those who had grown up LCMS and had since left, we used methods that are more indirect, asking pastors, teachers, and parents to pass along the survey. Of the 2,046 millennials who took the survey; 59% responded after seeing it on social media; another 40% of respondents were reached by a friend, family member, or church worker.

The average age of those that took the survey was twenty-four. Nearly twice as many women as men (F:66%, M:34%) responded. All the respondents had some meaningful connection to the LCMS, and 95% were confirmed in the LCMS. Of those 95%, 88% were confirmed between grades 6 and 9. Along with the helpful quantitative data, these millennials also provided over 100,000 words in their written responses explaining their experiences related to religion and the church.

We also received a solid number (377) of responses from those who had left the LCMS. This response was not enough to show a true reflection of how many millennials leave or where they are now, but it was large enough to enable the research team to extrapolate valuable information about different subgroups.³ We also found a clear statistical difference between those who claimed LCMS affiliation but who worshiped less than once a month (labeled Nominal LCMS) and those who worshiped at least once a month (labeled Active LCMS).

This study is a unique opportunity for the church to learn from millennials both inside and outside of the church. The respondents were willing to tell us who they are, what they value, and what they believe about God, the Bible, and the church. In many cases, they shared powerful personal experiences and perceptions of the church. This is not in any way to suggest the LCMS is considering changing its stance or turning away from sound biblical teaching. *Rather, this research is an exercise in careful listening.* We more faithfully address issues of retention by understanding where our millennials are in life and in faith.

It is particularly important to listen to those who left the LCMS. First, while retention is critical, reaching out to these millennials and those like them is just as critical. This data helps church leaders to understand where the church may need to repent and where young people may need to be called to repentance. It helps us identify strengths of the LCMS to engage the lost and learn how the church can pray for these young souls. Second, understanding millennials gives critical insight into Generation Z (those born in 1997 and after). While these generations differ from each other, just as all generations do, lessons learned from millennials can, with the help of God, reverse current retention trends.

Both congregational data and insight from millennials themselves provided a clearer answer to the question of retention in our congregations. With information from both phases, we are able to not only pinpoint the numbers of those who stayed or left the church but the qualities of both groups. The full report goes into much more detail. The intent here is to summarize findings that might be of particular interest to pastors and other church leaders.

Ministry should prioritize long-term relationships, embracing its distinct context.

Of the congregations who responded to our survey, 23% reported that they did not have accurate records of junior confirmations. Digital record keeping was available then and 28% of responding congregations had usable digital records. While a lack of usable records at a single congregation might suggest time constraints or numerous transitions in leadership, the sheer number of congregations who have failed to count their sheep cannot be dismissed. This is perhaps the most concrete and straightforward place to begin for better retention. Congregations will be more successful in ministering to individuals over their lifetimes if records of who they are and how to contact them are available.

For those with records, we found the tenure of the person who took the survey, overwhelmingly pastors, had an impact on retention of millennials. If the person who took the survey was present in the congregation in 2004–2006, they knew the whereabouts of approximately 75% of the millennials confirmed. If they were not present, they knew where only 55% of those millennials are now. Those who had been in the congregation since 2004 showed a 35% LCMS retention rate while those who had a shorter tenure had a 24% LCMS retention rate.⁴

The study's limited questions only show the influence of the *pastors* who took the survey. However, it is not hard to extrapolate from the data that the same impact could be found from other long-serving church workers and volunteer leaders. Long-term relationships with pastors, church workers, and volunteers allow young people to be engaged and re-engaged during transition or crisis. It provides stability and a safe place for speaking law and gospel at appropriate times. Interestingly, the age of the senior pastor showed no impact on retention. Long-term relationships along with good record keeping should be the starting focus for congregations seeking to better retain young people.

Parents are the most critical influence in their children's faith lives; 30% of millennials cited a parent as a major faith influence. Yet it is clear a network of pastors, church workers, and congregational leaders is necessary as well. Pastors were listed as a major faith influence nearly a quarter of the time and an additional 10% of respondents cited youth workers and DCEs. While that influence was mostly positive, one-in-six LCMS pastors were cited by active LCMS as being a negative influence. For those who have left the church, the negative influence of LCMS pastors on faith

rises to 48%. Other influential people, which were almost all positive, included non-parent family members, teachers, and pastors outside the LCMS.

Within the congregational study, we asked if there had been any significant changes to programs, curriculum, and staffing across Christian education since 2004. We found that changes in programs and curriculum showed no meaningful increase or decrease in retention. While program or curriculum changes could make an impact on an individual congregation, overall the impact was null. The temptation can be to search for a “silver bullet” program or curriculum that will turn the tides, engage young people in the church, and increase their understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The reality is no program or curriculum on its own will increase retention.

Congregations that added youth ministry staff experienced higher rates of LCMS retention into adulthood (34%) than congregations with no change (28%) and congregations that reduced youth ministry staff (19%). Adding staff also decreased the rate of young people leaving before high school graduation. Of congregations who added staff, 23% left the church; with no staffing change 32% left; and for congregations who reduced youth ministry staff 38% left. We recognize that the data does not speak to causality. Staffing may have been adjusted for smaller numbers of youth rather than the other way around. However, it gives an indication that both strong resourcing for youth ministry and the presence of long-term relationships with congregation leaders has a positive impact on retention.

Congregations cannot control all factors identified in retention. Small and rural congregations had a higher rate of knowledge of where millennials are currently worshipping. Larger and suburban congregations had a higher rate of LCMS retention. Large congregations also tend to have the largest proportion of Millennials who have joined the congregation in adulthood. These factors simply encourage congregations to embrace what benefits their location, size, and community offer. With this focus on relationships, records, and resources, congregations can also pinpoint specific issues for their demographic that need to be addressed.

Engaging youth and young adults in service and leadership increases retention in the LCMS.

The congregational survey asked the age of the congregation’s youngest leader and what role that leader has. More than half (57%) of congregations reported their youngest leader was under 32. Congregations with a leader under 30 reported a higher rate of young adults retained in their home congregation. They also show a lower rate of young adults leaving before high school graduation. Having a leader under 30 increased the number of young adults still worshipping in the LCMS, even if they have moved and changed congregations. This is intensified when noted that the impact young leaders have is not affected by the number of young adults in the congregation. Young people in meaningful leadership positions has a profound impact on retention.

Average percentage of young adults within the current worshipping body	6.1%  6.9%
Average percentage of current young adults who joined the church after High School	15.6%  23.3% 
Average percentage of 2004-2006 confirmands who still worship regularly at that congregation	9.4%  20.1% 
Average percentage of 2004-2006 confirmands who left church before graduating High School	36.0%  45.2% 
Average percentage of 2004-2006 confirmands who regularly worship at any LCMS church today	22.4%  30.5% 

 Youngest Leader Under 30  Youngest Leader Over 30

Vocation is important for the church, both for established and young leaders. If we believe that everyone has a vocation in the church, community, and household, our leadership should reflect the diversity of ages in the congregation. Without young leaders, congregations lose important insight. Young leaders know their peers. When they make decisions about how we use resources or communicate, they are better able to help choose a path that helps point their peers back to Jesus. Young leaders are an example to children and teens about what it means to be an active part of the body of Christ. When teens and children see young leaders, they know what their role in the congregation looks like beyond age-specific ministry like confirmation and youth group. Young leaders bring fresh eyes to ministry that allows important changes to be made that help share the gospel with a new generation.

Developing inter-generational leadership that works well together is not easy. Established leaders often feel as though they are the only ones who can do the task “correctly.” Millennials can come across as entitled to leadership they have not yet earned. With time, both groups can come to a healthy understanding of what the other brings. Established leaders have experience, knowledge of systems, and a critical understanding of history. Young leaders bring a fresh perspective and new strategies to share the gospel. Young leaders need support to be successful. Established leaders can be re-energized by answering questions, managing change, debriefing failure, and celebrating victory.

The temptation here is to place young adults in any role simply to have young leaders. Young adults may be looking for ways to live out their faith, but they identify token positions quickly. Token roles are quickly abandoned and leave a young person less likely to accept another role in the future. Congregations should take the time to identify the gifts of young people and help them find positions where those gifts can be of most use. In the survey, the leadership roles described were not filled exclusively by staff. The roles described were important, decision-making positions such as volunteer youth leader, Sunday school teacher, and board member. Rather than underestimating the abilities of young adults, challenge them with opportunities to develop and grow.

The survey also found that millennial respondents overwhelmingly identified community service as an important role of the congregation. Of the respondents, including those who had disconnected from the church, 94% said it was important for a congregation to be involved in community service. Even with the rise of nones, the importance of community service has not declined. *Young people are listening to hear if the church is about itself or about its neighbor. If we say our love overflows to our neighbor because Christ died for us, they want to see it. God can use this open door as an opportunity to engage or re-engage with the church.*

Congregations must be safe places for young people to wrestle with life and faith in order for them to faithfully reach out to today's culture.

Throughout the survey, we saw a dividing line over social and theological issues between those within the LCMS, other church bodies, and outside the church. Active LCMS millennials showed a strong certainty to Lutheran theology. Across the board they showed high rates of agreement with LCMS doctrine, especially in matters of theology and culture. For example, 78% of Active LCMS millennials disagree with ordaining women while 40% of Nominal LCMS millennials disagree. When asked if homosexual activity is okay 87% of Active LCMS millennials disagree while 38% of Nominal LCMS millennials disagree. On the issue of abortion, 85% of Active LCMS millennials disagree with a woman's right to abortion while only 47% of Nominal LCMS millennials disagree.

Along with asking about their stance on these issues, we asked how important these issues were. Those who left the church consistently rated issues over sexuality, women's ordination, and abortion as much more important than active LCMS. Many who left for other church bodies shared similar responses to active LCMS on issues of Scripture reading, prayer, and church. The strongest dividing line for each group was

where doctrine intersects with social cultural issues of today.

"Object to the LCMS over a social issue" was the top reason for leaving the LCMS in open-ended responses for Mainline Protestant (64%) and Unaffiliated (59%) and was the third highest response for Evangelical

The dismissal of questions often pushed them toward different beliefs.

Protestant (26%) young people. Millennials who left the LCMS often listed disagreement over specific issues for which the LCMS should not and will not change. In other cases, responses or reactions of church staff and members to disagreements, or simply questions, was listed. Questions about hard topics were simply dismissed, leaving the young person feeling isolated and judged. The dismissal of questions often pushed them toward different beliefs.

Reasons why respondents left the LCMS:

Feel the LCMS excludes people or is unwelcoming	160
<i>Personally felt judged in the LCMS</i>	56
<i>The LCMS is "closed-minded"</i>	40
Disagree with the LCMS stance on social issues	144
<i>Issues related to homosexuality or gender</i>	56
<i>Ordination of women</i>	38
Churches had too few young adults or no support for young adults	75
Different theology (baptism, communion, another point of doctrine)	55
Prefer contemporary worship (mostly from evangelicals)	53
There was no LCMS church in my area (or not one they liked)	43
LCMS has gotten too involved in politics	40
People in the LCMS are "inauthentic"	37
Some sort of personal bad experience in an LCMS church	37
Experienced a change in belief in God	31
Because of a spouse's religious preference	31
Simply preferred a different church	28

Conversely, active LCMS millennials showed signs that they had been able to ask hard questions and have challenging conversations within their congregation. We found 72% of Active LCMS millennials agreed there was a person at their congregation who was “safe” to talk with. Active LCMS were least likely to report feeling judged by the church (85% Unaffiliated; 57% Nominal LCMS; 57% Mainline Protestant; 29% Evangelical Protestant; 25% Active LCMS). They were also the most likely to say “my congregation looks out for my best interest” (18% Unaffiliated; 44% Nominal LCMS; 37% Mainline Protestant; 42% Evangelical Protestant; 57% Active LCMS).

In an increasingly post-Christian world, young people need our support to address the new or unique challenges to being Lutheran Christians. As we are aware, pastors, teachers, and parents, are far from the “gatekeepers” of information. With the internet in your pocket, Google is quick to provide an answer. Today we are called on to be filters of information, teaching young people to find real, biblical truth amidst many voices. In a perfect world, we would have the words and opportunities to create a foundation in their baptismal identities in which all questions could be answered. The speed of technology means that time is long past. It becomes critical for the people in the lives of young people to walk with them through tough questions in a complicated, fast-changing world.

At its core, being a safe person to talk with is being an active, engaged listener. Listening to young people is an act of patience, empathy, and of love. More than perhaps previous decades and generations, millennials and Generation Z are introduced to difficult, wide-ranging topics for which Christians can be important guides. Young people do not need answers to be watered down or void of truth. We cannot simply listen to the surface, provide pat answers, and send them on their way. We must engage them in active investigation and discovery. We may find ourselves

defensive at young people's questions. "They should know better" is in part, a defensive reaction that their teaching hasn't completely worked. Give grace to these questions and remind yourself of the struggles you may have had in your youth. Embrace the gift of these questions for we see in this ministry the face of Jesus who himself asked good questions.

Parents and congregations must prepare for and engage young people during time of transition and crisis.

Regardless of the generation, young people go through numerous transitions as they mature, take on new responsibilities, and move out of childhood. These transitions create opportunities for new relationships, new contexts for identity building, and new vocational roles. The research shows that parents and the congregation can play a positive role while ministering to young people during these key transitions. Only 55% of Active LCMS millennials agree that their home congregation ministered to them during times of life transitions. This was the strongest response of any group. This is one area in which many congregations may be able to increase their connections to millennials.

Young adulthood brings with it a series of transitions that may come very quickly. Young people may move away from their hometown, move to a new school, move out of the family home, expand their friend group, take on a new level of sport or music, start jobs and develop more serious romantic relationships. Each of these transitions is a tenuous moment where their faith and relationship with the church can falter. Over time, if transitions are not handled carefully, young people may end up far away from the faith in which they were raised. The church can bring much needed stability during these transitions. Caring, understanding relationships with parents, church workers, and other adults can build a young adult's understanding of the beauty and value of Christian community, drawing them closer in relationship to God.

Never is this more evident than in the transition from high school to college. Those who are active today were in weekly worship 90% of the time in high school while those no longer active worshiped weekly about 70% of the time. Following high school, however, weekly worship drops to 67% for today's active millennials and plummets to 17% for those not active today. Following college graduation, weekly worship for active millennials increased to 73% but those not active today slipped to less than 5%.

The transition from high school to life beyond, usually onto a college campus, is a time when many young people transition out of the church. Our data does not provide specific insight into why this disassociation happens. However, it does show the need to prepare young people for this transition. In preparing, there is an opportunity for open conversation about youth's desire to stay in the church. Some young people may have been in worship primarily at the expectation of their parents. In college, these young people embrace their newfound freedom, dissociate themselves from the church, and miss Christian community and receiving Christ's

gifts. Others find it difficult to connect to a new Christian community because of inaccessible LCMS congregations. It becomes all too easy to disconnect, and without active help, they may not reconnect.

Also, congregations may engage in new ways with high-school graduates who stay close to home for work or college or return home after college graduation. Only one of over 2000 millennials mentioned returning to the church after having children. While they may return with their own family, our data suggests they are disconnecting without an intention of returning. The local congregation must actively reengage these young adults. This can mean opening new responsibilities, providing Christian community, and placing them in leadership roles that benefit the ministry of the congregation. For those starting families, the congregation can provide spiritual care for their young children such as opportunities for Christian education and connection to older mentors. Transitions such as graduation and establishing careers and families are critical moments where congregations and parents can help a young person find a new congregation or establish new, adult relationships with their existing congregation.

Millennials reported that crises were often where faith and community are deepened or lost. Of millennial respondents, 15% noted a crisis event as a pivotal faith moment. These pivotal faith moments could be positive or negative, often depending on the response of family and/or the church to the crisis. Of non-LCMS respondents, 9% mentioned having their doubts or questions ignored or dismissed. Crisis may stem from issues such as the death of a loved one, loss of family income, natural disaster, betrayal by friends, or an identity struggle. Crisis is both universal and unique to everyone.

It serves the congregation well to have resources and plans before a crisis occurs. This can include access to resources such as counselors, Mental Health First Aid, and other trainings for parents and other adults. It is important to have knowledge of local support groups for difficult topics such as suicide, divorce, and addiction. Preparation means that when a teen goes through an identity changing or challenging event the congregation can offer hope, absolution, and consolation. While you cannot know when crisis will hit, you can know that the church's response can draw a young person close to, or push them further away from, Christian community.

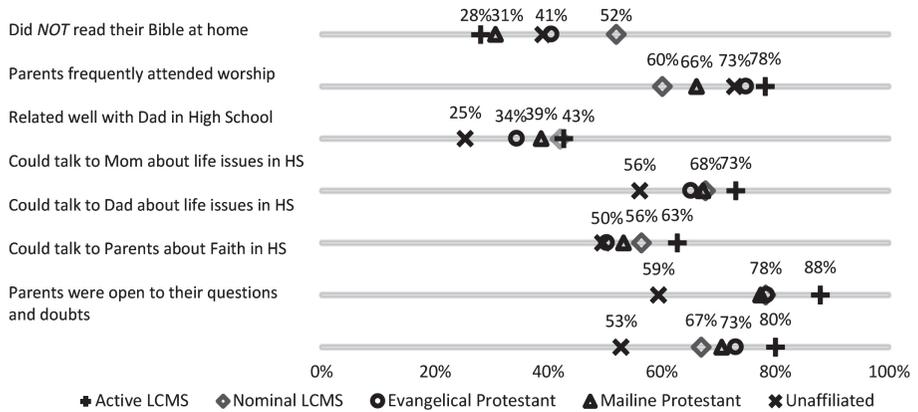
Parents play a critical role in young adult's faith development and retention.

Scripture, common sense, and numerous studies including ours, show that parents are the number-one people who affect the faith lives of young people. Nearly 1-in-3 millennials listed a parent as one of the most influential people in their lives. While that influence was usually positive, those who left the LCMS were more than twice as likely to say a parent had a negative influence (13% vs 5%).

Today's active LCMS millennials were the most likely to see a high level of faith practiced

by their parents. This included frequent Bible reading at home, praying as a family, regular worship attendance of both parents together (continuing even today), and at least one parent having a service or leadership role in the congregation. Of all the other profiles, parents of nominal LCMS millennials are least likely to be leaders in the congregation, read the Bible with their children, and attend worship regularly now or in the past. Young people will struggle to emulate faith behavior they don't see. When parents don't prioritize worship and congregational engagement, young people won't either.

Today's Active LCMS millennials were also the most likely to report having a good relationship with parents in high school. They report they related well with parents in general, specifically with their fathers. They felt they could talk to both parents about life issues and could talk openly with at least one parent about faith. This safe relationship with parents meant young people could bring up their questions and doubts to their parents. When difficult issues arise, if parents are open and engaging their children are more likely to stay in the church.



Pastors who are also parents want nothing more than for their children to grow up into faithful Christian adults. Of the active LCMS millennials who took the survey, 15% had a father as a pastor. Similarly, 12% of those who are unaffiliated with any church had a father as a pastor. Other sub-groups had much smaller proportions of pastor's children. The experience of pastor's children can translate into active church membership and almost as easily into leaving the faith. The qualitative data from those who had left showed evidence that this was sometimes because of the relationship with the father. Other times they were turned away by the behavior of the congregation toward their parents. This is a reminder for pastors of the importance of prioritizing the vocation of father and guarding their family.

LCMS congregations should be encouraged to support parents in their teaching and practicing the faith. Parents should be encouraged to engage their children in age-appropriate ways in the worship service. Congregations can help make service and

leadership opportunities accessible to parents by providing childcare or technology. While this may be more complicated, parents serve as a critical example to their children of what it means to live out faith. As children approach faith milestones, congregations can provide resources and training for parents. Smaller congregations with few children can especially benefit from providing parents with Sunday school or family-faith growth activities for the home. There are many ways congregations can support young parents in their understanding of Jesus, Scripture, and doctrine and encourage them to weave these matters into discussions of life and faith.

Summary

The data provides understanding, practical ideas, and even additional questions. We are pleased to have a much deeper and clearer answer to “Why aren’t millennials in church?”

Understanding is just the beginning. Action can be taken now to minister to and with millennials, teens, and children today.

- Incorporate young adults and young people into service and leadership in the congregation. Service may be as simple as ushering, setting up for events, and assisting with Vacation Bible School. It may also mean lifting up leaders to guide service initiatives, such as serving as an elder or on a board. Young leadership and service is critical for engaging and retaining young people.
- Review your congregation’s membership data, especially of young people who may have recently graduated from high school or college. Use this contact data to facilitate new ways of engaging and re-engaging young people on the margins of your congregation and community.
- Create an action plan for parents, pastors, and church workers to assist high-school graduates making transitions to college campuses, the military, or careers. Provide resources for finding a new church home, campus ministry, or keeping connected to their home church as they transition. Plan with the understanding that the first three weeks of a major transition is a vital time in the faith life of a young person.
- Create a congregational culture that determines ministry success by relationships not programs and numbers. Through life-giving relationships connected to Jesus and his church, young people can be emboldened in the one, true faith to confess it before others so that others may know Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Healthy and caring relationships, through which Christ’s love is shared, have always been key for retention in the church and passing leadership onto the next generation.
- Train youth with solid theology and with strategies for investigating scripture. The flow of information, and access points for such information, shouldn’t stop. Incorporate adults in Christian education who are engaged listeners, comfortable with questions and able to teach strategies for seeing the world through a

Lutheran Christian lens. As they struggle, keep conversation going and relational doors open. Should they seek out other church bodies, those ties may well hold hope for their return in the future.

- Express the importance of parents practicing the faith through regular Bible reading, prayer, and worship. Surround young parents with older mentors who have survived the trials and have celebrated the joys of parenting. Find opportunities to train and support parents in their role as teachers of the faith.

Each millennial is a unique creation of our loving God. We may talk about them in terms of statistics, but pastors, church workers, and volunteer leaders know their names, unique stories, abilities, and gifts. Shy away from stereotypes and assumptions. Listen to millennials who were hurt by the church and rejoice with those who have experienced the church as God intended. Jesus is the head of the church. It appears that numbers in the LCMS and other American Christian denominations will plateau or decrease in at least the near future. However, by God's grace, we may ask where the young people are less and less for they will be there with us.

We encourage you to read the whole study, watch our webinars, and utilize discussion sheets for leaders. The research team is currently working on additional resources connected to many of these key findings available on LCMS Youth Ministry's YouthESource at: <http://www.youthesource.com/2018/06/04/lcms-young-adult-research/>.

Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/01/defining-generations-where-millennials-end-and-post-millennials-begin/>
- 2 The 2015 Faith Communities Today study (www.faithcommunitiestoday.org), estimated that 24% of the US population was aged 20–34 at the time, with 15% of the LCMS and only 12% of all US Protestant Churches being the same age.
- 3 Researchers grouped respondents into five categories for which the full report gives insights to their responses:
 - Active LCMS – Worshipping at least once a month
 - Nominal LCMS – Consider themselves LCMS, but not regular worshippers
 - Evangelical Protestant – mainly non-denominational, and also WELS, SBC, PCA
 - Mainline Protestant – Mainly ELCA, with some respondents in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and United Methodist
 - Unaffiliated – atheists, agnostic, spiritual but not religious (SBNR) with no church activity, or belonging to a different faith
- 4 LCMS retention is defined as being engaged with an LCMS congregation, whether it be the home church or another LCMS congregation.

When Salt Loses Its Saltiness

Nihilism and the Contemporary Church

Joel P. Okamoto



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The church must always seek to be faithful within her particular circumstances. But this imperative remains a platitude unless an accurate description and analysis of the situation accompanies it.

Many have proposed ways to understand the current situation in much of North America, Europe, and elsewhere. Some are so common that

Christians identify them by labels like “individualism,” “secularism,” and “pluralism.” These ways often come from genuine insights and offer valuable guidance, but some see the problem as *external* to the church.

“Individualism” is the attitude that the solitary individual is sufficient, if not morally obligated, to depend on their own strength and reason, and therefore the church’s message of sin and grace, of faith in God and selfless love for neighbor, does not readily connect any longer. “Secularism” is the idea that many people outside the church think that God has been explained away by the lore of science and psychology. “Pluralism” is the idea that many people outside the church have been conditioned to think all religions are more or less equally valid ways to find what is good, true, right, and enduring.

More penetrating and ultimately helpful proposals explain how the church herself can be complicit in promoting unfaithfulness. One is “the paranoid style.” Coined by historian Richard Hofstadter in the 1960s, it explains not only a lot of civil politics but also church politics.¹

Another proposal along these lines is what Friedrich Nietzsche called “nihilism.” It is less well-known but well worth discussing.

Nietzsche and Nihilism

Few philosophers of any age have wider name recognition than Friedrich Nietzsche, and he has done very well with very little. Most people know him only from a few tag lines—“God is dead” and “Übermensch”—and an association with Nazism. But they have been enough.

Those who learn more about his thinking usually find much to alarm them. Terry Eagleton clearly represented these features in a recent book:

If one is to take him at his word, he looks forward to a future of global warfare in which there will be a reversion to slavery, the poor will be prevented from breeding and weaker people will be crushed or even exterminated. ‘The weak and ill-constituted shall perish,’ he announces in *The Anti-Christ*, though whether they will wither away of their own accord, or with a little help from the likes of Nietzsche himself, is not clear. The brutality of his politics is in marked contrast to the subtlety of his thought. As a sworn enemy of peace, compassion, democracy, effeminacy, independent women and the proletarian rabble, he is in love with everything cruel, severe, wicked, manly, malicious, vindictive and domineering. Love of one’s neighbor is despicable, and pity runs contrary to the law of evolution. It is the sick, not the evil, who are the source of spiritual danger.²

But those who learn more about his thinking also find that Nietzsche possessed some remarkable insights. One concerned ethics. Alasdair MacIntyre called his analysis of Enlightenment moral philosophies an “historic achievement” and concluded that “his relentlessly serious pursuit of the problem” of ethics free of moral fictions like “rights” made Nietzsche “*the* moral philosopher” of his age.³ Civil politics in the contemporary United States vindicate this judgment. Moral discourse is still stuck with the old categories, but it is clearly “beyond good and evil.” For example, public debates over matters like abortion, same-sex marriage, and gun control are about the extent of individual rights, not about whether they are good or evil. For these reasons, MacIntyre said the basic contemporary question of moral philosophy was “Nietzsche or Aristotle?”⁴

“Nihilism” is the tag line for another of Nietzsche’s formidable insights. Sometime in 1885 or 1886, he wrote in a notebook, “Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?”⁵ In itself, the mention of nihilism was unsurprising. When Ivan Turgenev published *Fathers and Sons* in 1862, he gave wide circulation to nihilism. In 1881, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated, and nihilism gained wider and more urgent attention. In *Anti-Nietzsche*, a thoughtful analysis of and response to Nietzsche’s conception of nihilism, Malcolm Bull explains:

In the 1880s, nihilism was the subject of several books in Germany, and the topic of excitable commentary throughout Europe and

the United States. Nietzsche's interest should therefore be seen in the context of a wave of international anxiety akin, perhaps to the fascination with Islamic terrorism since 2001. This, too, had racial undertones: the *New York Times* described the Russian nihilists as "Asiatic Nomads seeking to destroy Western civilization," and there was frequent reference to their "Tartar" origins. Describing Bakunin, one French writer offered the view that "this man was certainly not a European, a Slav, a child of Aryan deists, but a descendant of the atheist hordes who have nearly destroyed our world several times already, and who, instead of the idea of progress, carry the idea of nothingness buried in their hearts."⁶

What would have been surprising, had anyone known what he was thinking or read what he was writing, was what *Nietzsche* meant by "nihilism." He knew of Russian nihilism, but he regarded it as "belief in unbelief" and contemptuously concluded it sprang from a need for faith.⁷ The nihilism Nietzsche proposed was quite different. It was a sweeping historical process by which all of the idols that gave value and meaning to Western societies would ruin themselves, and out of which could arise, he hoped, new and higher persons in societies with higher and greater purposes—new, higher, and greater as *he* thought, to be sure.

Nietzsche's influence on contemporary social and political thought is undeniable, and this would be one reason to engage his conception of nihilism.⁸ But Nietzsche's discussion of nihilism is clear and concrete enough to stand apart from his specific historical argument and social agenda, and compelling and convincing enough to attend to on its own. Indeed, set apart from his historical argument and social agenda, Nietzsche's insight becomes more cogent—and the problem it illuminates more urgent.

Nietzsche was right that nihilism stood at the door. Moreover, to keep with Nietzsche's image, nihilism has now come through the door. Indeed, it would be fairer and more fruitful to think *we are at home in nihilism than to think nihilism is at home among us*. So, we would do well to understand what Nietzsche meant by "nihilism" and to consider what nihilism means for Christian life, witness, and theology.

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What Is Nihilism?

All illuminating insights, even the wrong ones, are simple and uncomplicated. To take a Christian example, Paul was given insight into the mystery of Christ, "that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in

Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph 3:6). From this single, simple, uncomplicated insight come many characteristic Christian themes: faith in Christ, not works of the law; faith comes by hearing; the defining message is the gospel of Jesus Christ, not the Mosaic law; righteousness apart from works of the law; justification by faith; Abraham as father of all; salvation by grace alone. Similar things could be said about the Buddha’s claim that desire causes suffering; Greek idealism; algebra; the Copernican hypothesis; the *a priori* concepts of Kant; and Darwin’s idea of evolution by natural selection.

So also with Nietzsche on nihilism, which goes like this: “What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer.”⁹ The term “highest values” refers to those things by which everything else finds their value. Nietzsche regularly identified nihilism with Christianity, and Christians as nihilists. “*Nihilist und Christ*,”—nihilist and Christian—“they rhyme, and they do not merely rhyme.”¹⁰ Accordingly, Nietzsche regularly identified the highest values with the central Christian themes, including God, redemption, and eternity.¹¹ Philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly summarized clearly what it meant for God to be the highest value, that is, that by which everything else finds its value, with Europe of the Middle Ages:

The classic metaphysical arguments for the existence of God, or for the necessity of his various attributes, are irrelevant here. What matters instead is that in the Middle Ages people could not help but *experience themselves as* determined or created by God. Indeed, it was so much a part of the way they understood the world they lived in, so taken for granted by everything that made sense to them, that it was virtually inconceivable that one’s identity might be determined in any other way. This was true, of course, about kings and queens. To say that they ruled by divine right, as was commonly understood in the Middle Ages, is to say that they were chosen specifically by God to be the rulers of society. But it was not only the kings and queens who were chosen by divine right: everyone else fell into a place in society according to the divine plan of God himself. . . . This order of things was not a *belief* that anyone argued for or a worldview that anyone proposed; it was simply taken for granted by everyone worth talking or listening to.¹²

But Nietzsche did not restrict the highest values only to Christian themes. He included more general concepts, including truth, morality, and metaphysics.

The highest values are *devaluated* when they no longer serve as the *highest values*. The problem here is a matter of *function*. Nihilism is not when the highest values like God have been falsified, forsaken, or forgotten, although they may come to such ends. Nihilism is when the highest values no longer serve to give value to everything



Unfinished sketch of Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) by his cousin Niels Christian Kierkegaard, c. 1840 (Credit: Wikimedia Commons/Alvaro Marques Hijazo).

else. So, nihilism is perfectly compatible with Christians who worship regularly, pray sincerely, and read their Bibles. Across Europe, others had observed the same development. In Denmark, Søren Kierkegaard was decrying the devaluation of all things Christian when he wrote, “If what we mean by being a Christian really is being a Christian—what then is God? He is the most comical being that ever lived, His Word the most comical book that ever has come to light.”¹³ In his poem “Dover Beach,” Matthew Arnold listened to the devaluation of the highest values as “the Sea of Faith” retreated with “Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,” and watched “. . . here as on a darkling plain/Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,/Where ignorant armies clash by night.” In France, Charles Baudelaire was observing how God had been devaluated—how God was no longer really God—when he wrote,

Even though God did not exist, Religion would be none the less holy and divine. God is the sole being who has no need to exist in order to reign.

The most prostitute of all beings is the Supreme Being, God Himself, since for each man he is the friend above all others; since he is the common, inexhaustible fount of Love.

God and His profundity. It is possible even for the intelligent man to seek in God that helper and friend whom he can never find. God is the eternal confidant and friend in that tragedy of which each man is hero. Perhaps there are usurers and assassins who say to God: “Lord, grant that my next enterprise may be successful!” But the prayers of these vile persons do not mar the virtue and joy of my own.¹⁴

Moreover, as Baudelaire implies, one sees the devaluation of the highest values *in their very use*. This is what Nietzsche meant by saying, “The highest values *devalue themselves*.” In that special case called the “literal sense,” values cannot do anything, including devalue themselves. But Nietzsche meant that in their very use, the highest values were causing their values to decline. The more people prayed like Baudelaire’s usurers and assassins, the more God looked like a prostitute, and the more one could think that God had no need to exist in order for religion to be holy and divine.

At this point, the rest of Nietzsche’s conception of nihilism—“The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer”—comes into focus. One can tell when the highest values have devaluated themselves by asking “Why?” and discerning no “objective” or “public” answer, that is, finding no answer beyond a community’s own reasons such as “This is how we have always done it” and personal reasons like “This works for me.” For example, recall Baudelaire’s first note about God: “Even though God did not exist, Religion would be none the less holy and divine. God is the sole being who has no need to exist in order to reign.” Why might someone today agree with him? Perhaps because they share contemporary philosopher Bryan Magee’s experience with religious people:

My most strongly rooted objection to Christianity is that its explanations fail so abysmally to take the measure of the mysteries they purport to illuminate: they offer simple-minded interpretations when what we are confronted with are almost impenetrable ignorance and bafflement. But I have this problem, if in lesser degree, with all religions, even the most attractive. They tell us things, but I find myself thinking: “How do they know? *Perhaps* what they say is true. I would like it to be. And it would be nice if it were. But what reason do they have for saying that it is?” And I have never heard a convincing answer to that question. People hold religious belief for umpteen different kinds of reason: because they have a deep conviction of its truth, or because it provides a welcome explanation of their experience, or makes them feel better, or comforts them, or makes them members of a sympathetic social group, or because they imbibed it at an uncritical age—or for goodness knows how many other reasons; but from none of these does it follow that the belief is true. And although I have pressed the question often enough I have never received an answer that really is an *answer*. In the end it usually comes down to one thing: people want to believe. But this has nothing to do with truth.¹⁵

This is nihilism: believers will have reasons for their own believing, but not for everyone believing. Their reasons have nothing to do with truth. When there is nothing beyond the will to believe, their religion—the highest value—devalues itself. The aim is lacking; that is, there is no objective aim, only subjective satisfaction. “Why?” finds only “people [who] want to believe.” Note also how closely Baudelaire’s third note about God—God as “the eternal confidant and friend in that tragedy of which each man is hero”—coincides with how many contemporary Americans describe God. For instance, there is the God of American small groups as discerned by sociologist Robert Wuthnow: “Rather than being the inscrutable deity of the Reformation, for example, God is now a buddy. God no longer represents such awe-inspiring qualities as being infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly righteous. God is now on the same level as yourself, except perhaps a little warmer and friendlier.”¹⁶

An even more common instance is “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”¹⁷ As the name suggests, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about three things: “about inculcating a moralistic approach to life”; “about providing therapeutic benefits to its adherents”; and “about belief in a particular kind of God: one who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in one’s affairs—especially affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved. Most of the time, the God of this faith keeps a safe distance.”¹⁸ And what is this god like? One young woman said: “God is like someone who is always there for you, I don’t know, it’s like God is God. He’s just somebody that’ll always

help you go through whatever you're going through. When I became a Christian I was just praying and it always makes me feel better."¹⁹ In both instances, God may remain "eternal," but he is now "confidant and friend," not the Almighty Creator and Redeemer. And the highest values devalue themselves.

At this point, one might ask, "Won't the highest values be replaced? Or at least, can't they be replaced?" This question helps to understand fully the concept of "highest values." Nietzsche's own answer was, "They will be replaced," and his own social project was, "A revaluation of all values."²⁰ Therefore, he thought nihilism "represents a pathological transitional stage (what is pathological is the tremendous generalization, the inference that there is no meaning at all)."²¹ But the question

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about replacement requires us to be clear how the highest values are special among values. They define; they constitute. They are absolute; they are sublime. They are not explained, because they explain everything else. As noted earlier, the divine order of things in the Middle Ages was not proposed for belief but taken for granted. This was explaining the highest value as the highest value. Lao Tzu said that the Tao was not and the Tao was nameless. He explained the highest value as the highest value.

When Muslims speak of God's unity, they mean more than that there is but one God; they mean he is utterly unique, completely beyond compare. For this reason they neither attempt nor allow visual representations of God. They explain the highest value as the highest value.

As such, the highest values are not neatly or conveniently replaced with other values. Their devaluation and their replacement must be radical and revolutionary, and therefore often long, messy, and contentious. Nietzsche was ahead of his time, but our time's most widely known and appropriated philosophical idea, Thomas Kuhn's account of scientific revolutions, is just detailed argument concerning a special case of this Nietzschean insight.²² Science had been thought to advance through gradual accumulations of small advances. But this did account of scientific change could not account for actual radical developments, like the shift from Aristotelian mechanics to Newtonian mechanics or from Newtonian mechanics to quantum mechanics. The different ways of doing science were not improvements on old ways; they were revolutionary new ways. To explain this, Kuhn conceived of "paradigms." Paradigms embody the assumptions, concepts, distinctions, methods, and aims that serve as a constitution for doing and even conceiving of science. Within paradigms,

all “normal science” not only takes place, but it is imagined. Normal science does indeed progress gradually. But paradigms go away only after they have lost their capacity to be paradigms, that is, only after they no longer functioned as the “highest values.” But “paradigm shifts” do not take place in small gradual steps. The process by which this happens is anything but normal or conventional. It is radical; it amounts to a revolution. And the process is often long, messy, and contentious because it is a shift from one defining and constitutive way of seeing and doing to another defining and constitutive way of seeing and doing. As with scientific paradigms, so also with other “highest values.”

Kuhn also helps us to see still more clearly what Nietzsche meant by the “highest values.” Nietzsche meant what he said: the *highest* values. The highest values are truly those which are definitive and constitutive. God, for Nietzsche, was not only a person or a figure; he represented the way to comprehend all things. So, to say, as Nietzsche famously did, “God is dead,” is much more than to deny the existence of a particular divine being or to recognize the validity of atheism. It points out that the way to see the universe and all that is in it and all ways to make value judgments and find meaning had gone. So, for example, atheism and materialism, as commonly understood, are concepts too small for Nietzsche. This comes through clearly in his short sketch, “How the ‘Real World’ at last Became a Myth.”²³ The “real world” is the spiritual, transcendental world. Plato and his teaching represent it. Nietzsche outlines six stages of the “history of [this] error.” It started with Plato and then its Christian appropriation. But the process does not end with atheism and materialism, which is when the “real world” has been refuted and useless. For atheists and materialists, the “real world” of God and spirit still matters; the very labels show this. “Atheism” and “materialism” reflect *oppositions* to theism and idealism, and thus the “real world” still matters. Nietzsche’s final stage went further. It would be when “*with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!*” This is when the “spiritual/material” paradigm has itself disappeared, no longer even was thought. This, in turn, shows how completely and comprehensively Nietzsche thought the highest values. And that, in turn, shows how much is at stake with nihilism: everything.

Nihilism and the Contemporary Church

If this is *what* nihilism is, then *how* does it matter? For the contemporary church, it matters in at least three ways: as an objective social condition; as a general subjective condition; and as a perennial temptation.

In the first place, nihilism matters as a normal feature of contemporary life, that is, as an *objective social condition*. Philosopher James Edwards calls this “normal nihilism.”²⁴ This means that no matter what any particular individuals may think of themselves, most people will automatically regard and treat them according to assumptions and logic of nihilism. Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* opens with the image of a clearance sale: “Not only in the business world but also in the world of

ideas, our age stages *ein wirklicher Ausverkauf* [a real clearance sale]. Everything can be had at such a bargain price that it becomes a question whether there is finally anyone who will make a bid.”²⁵ Edwards observes that this was “written in clear foresight of our normal nihilism,” and he expands the image: “Prices have been cut to the bone. Crowds move through the market-hall of European intellectual history, fingering the bargains displayed there. Yet the goods—the ‘highest values’ of European civilization—are strangely slow to move.” Or is it strange? “Why should one live or (more sharply) die for something that is, after all, only a *value*, only a structure of interpretation posited by some passing form of life?”²⁶ “Clearance sale,” “prices,” “goods,” and “bargains” belong to a *shopping* metaphor that aptly captures how, how widely, and how naturally the highest values of Western culture are devaluated. Like everything else, the highest values, including God, justification, and Bible, are naturally thought in terms of price and traded in terms of what they can do for you.

In the second place, nihilism is also a *general subjective condition*. It is not just “others” who think and trade in the “highest values”; “we” do, too. Once people understood themselves without thought to be dealing directly with God, or in touch with the transcendent spiritual realm, or treating the world accurately through their senses and by the power of their reason. And while many still confidently believe they are doing such things, now they must believe that they are doing so.²⁷ They also know that others do not, and that they have no clear, unmistakable way to show or argue them out of these other convictions. Among other things, this means that being religious means being a nihilist. As Edwards explains:

What does it mean for us to be religious? It means for us to be some sort of nihilist, conscious or unconscious, joyful or sorrowful, or somewhere in between. We can no longer serve gods, nor gaze on Forms, nor encounter ourselves as the fully present ego-subject; we can only monger self-devaluated values: values that still trade under old and hallowed names “Yahweh,” “Allah,” “Jesus,” “truth,” “love,” “reality,” “evil,” “I,” and so forth; but values that are now a bit shopworn from our handling, and a bit gimcrack when seen in bright light. . . . Nihilism is now the way the world comes to us, the way it sounds itself out in us; it is the way we comport ourselves to what we are given. We are all now nihilists.²⁸

To be sure, not every single individual in Western societies like the United States thinks this way. But most do. More importantly for our purpose, most Christians do. In the most general way, they do this in that *they must conceive what Christianity is*. The most serious and thoughtful way to do this is to conceive the Christian message and Christian theology as a “structure of interpretation.” A “structure of interpretation” (known by other labels such as “paradigm,” and “worldview”) consists of a set of assumptions, concepts, conventions, and aims used to make sense and

get around the world. “Confessionalism” in a thoroughgoing sense (as opposed to a particular triumph of style over substance) is a “structure of interpretation.”²⁹ So are C. S. Lewis’s conceptions of Christian theology, science, and non-Christian religions when he wrote: “Christian theology can fit in science, art, morality, and the sub-Christian religions. The scientific point of view cannot fit in any of these things, not even science itself. I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”³⁰ Lewis had to, and so do we, because Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, materialists, and neo-pagans all find themselves competing to account for and explain each of us, all of us, and all things.

The key here is that Christians in the West “find themselves competing.” Once upon a time, Christians did not compete. They ruled culturally. But the fact that now they compete amounts to a marked devaluation of everything Christian, starting with God, the Bible, and salvation. Moreover, the terms of the competition add to their devaluation. What were once unquestioned, even unquestionable, now need to account for themselves. Christians now need not only to identify their god (answering “Who is your god?”), but also to explain the very idea of God. It is no longer enough to have a position on the Bible as the Word of God. Christians now need to explain how it arose and how it supposed to function. Salvation can no longer be taken for granted as the ultimate aim. Christians now need to explain why they think saving even should matter. The questioning alone amounts to a loss of status—a deep discount. Christians compound the devaluation when they cannot answer such questions cogently—when their idea of “god” or “the Bible” or “salvation” seems shallow, forced, or desperate. And Christians are selling for pennies on the dollar when they cannot even understand what is being asked—as often happens when they are asked “Who is your god?” or “Where did the Bible come from.” In short, the fact that Christians must compete, and that others set the terms for their competition, confirms what Edwards claimed: “We are all now nihilists.” And when they really can’t compete, then it must be said: “They’re *really* nihilists.”

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In the third place, nihilism poses a *perennial temptation*. Normal nihilism means that nihilism is in the background. It does not stand out as much as determines what can stand out. It conditions what and how we think rather than tell us what to think. The two most general temptations posed by nihilism, at least for the church, go together: either accommodate or resist. Accommodation, which characterizes the theologically “liberal” or “progressive” Christian wing, accepts that the highest values have no enduring aim. It critically selects and recasts them in ways that might insure the church’s survival. Resistance, which characterizes the theologically

“conservative” or “traditional” Christian wing, stays with the highest values regardless of whether they serve any clear purpose, or even if they have clear meaning. Both are inherently nihilistic. Alasdair MacIntyre’s observations about theists’ response to atheism illustrate how they are. He summarized the Christian response to the threat of atheism as offering “atheists less and less in which to disbelieve.”³¹ This happens in two ways, corresponding to accommodation and resistance. Accommodation explicitly gives up or reinterprets teachings that atheists and other skeptics and critics will not accept, such as the virgin birth of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. With the resistance strategy, “a process of ‘natural selection’” occurs, in which “only some of the dogmas are really maintained with conviction while others, mere ‘vestiges,’ receive only the inconsequential deference of not being expunged from the articles of faith.” Examples of such doctrines include the resurrection of the dead and the Trinity. The vestigial status of the doctrine of the resurrection shows by the large numbers of conservative Christians whose eschatological hope is to die and go to heaven. The vestigial status of the doctrine of the Trinity shows because most Christians cannot explain why it was appropriate for the word to become flesh, not the Father nor the Spirit, or why a theology of the word, including the Scriptures, should begin with the personal word of God, not the Spirit. For that matter—and this all the more confirms matters—they cannot even understand what they are being asked.³² Moreover, both ways are nihilistic because both devalue the *entire body* of Christian doctrine. A body, to state the obvious, is a complete whole. To be willing to discard parts of the body, or to let some parts atrophy, devalues the whole body. More generally, both accommodation and resistance are nihilistic because they *react*. Both are forever on the defensive, letting the situation dictate how they understand themselves. Accommodation does this by constantly trying to negotiate for some secure place. Resistance does this by reflexively saying “No” to change, and by being dedicated repeating the same things.

Nihilism and Christian Identity and Life

Nietzsche’s conception of nihilism, though incomplete and fragmentary, is richer and more complex than we have considered. The concept of the highest values is more radical than discussed, because they include metaphysics, morality, and truth. Nietzsche distinguished between “active” and “passive” nihilism, and “complete” and “incomplete.” He also explained nihilism as a psychological state. We have not explored any of these.

But we have considered enough to affirm nihilism as an important insight into the contemporary situation in general, and for the Christian church in particular. Stepping back to put matters in a wider perspective, we find its importance lies in two related features: first, it makes sense of varied aspects of contemporary life, especially as they bear on Christian identity and life; second, it points toward a coherent theological account and response. Pursuing themes already mentioned, we can see

*Nihilism also explains both
“liberal” and “conservative”
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that Nietzsche’s account of nihilism leads us both to Kierkegaard and the big clearance sale—now fully present in church marketing and church shopping, to say nothing of the administration and personnel that is required to sustain these practices—

and also to Baudelaire and the God who is prostitute, confidant, friend—now fully present in therapeutic religion and prosperity theology. Nihilism also explains both “liberal” and “conservative” theologies in a coherent way. Nihilism explains both why they are mirror images of the other—they are two different responses to the same problem—and why they both result in theology looking ever more sentimental and self-serving. But nihilism does more than offer a large-scale explanation. It also points to particular considerations for Christians to seek to lead more faithful lives and give more faithful witness. So, with the preceding discussion in mind, here are several considerations.

1. Once again, the question is not whether Christians in the West will be nihilists, but what kind they should be. In today’s situation, they cannot help but be understood and assessed as nihilists. At a minimum, they will appear as nihilists in the sense that they will be people who have a certain comprehensive “structure of interpretation.” Christians should follow C. S. Lewis’s example about Christian theology and accept this, rather than deny or ignore this. In other words, they should learn to understand themselves as *people who imagine and understand all things according to a particular account of everything*. Less comprehensive answers to “What is a Christian?” like “A Christian is a follower of Jesus Christ” do not help Christians to deal with nihilism as directly. Still more narrow answers like “A Christian is someone who believes eternal life comes by grace not by works” or “A Christian is someone who believes salvation is in Jesus Christ alone” will be less helpful still, precisely because they are so narrow. Such answers aim to distinguish Lutherans from other Christians. In the context of normal nihilism, however, this aim is misguided; “Why?” finds no appropriate answer.
2. The need to take seriously the Christian account of everything raises a special problem. The Christian account of everything is an account of the one true God and his creation. But the teachings about both God and creation are among those which most Christians have given up on in the way MacIntyre had observed generally. Some do this by radically recasting the traditional doctrine of creation, surrendering features that are questioned or contradicted in the name of “science.” Others do this by radically recasting the doctrine of God. Instead of conceiving him as the Absolute Sovereign free to create all things as he pleases

and accountable to no one and no standards, he is understood as an engineering student and his creation as a senior design project, to which some give an “A+” and others an “F.” Still others can’t see why any of this matters. Nihilism affects Christians at exactly the point where a faithful and appropriate thinking begins.

At least this gives us a real starting point for dealing with our situation, which is: Christian witness, preaching, teaching, and theology need to recover not only correct teaching about God and creation, but they need to give an account of God and creation that makes sense of evangelism, preaching, worship, teaching, and theological reflection.

3. This claim needs more details, but before offering them, we should note a relevant problem: Some Christians may object to accepting the nihilistic situation as promoting relativism. This objection is at once a mistake and a reminder. Christians in today’s situation cannot help but be understood as holding only one set of values among many, as having only one structure of interpretation among several.³³ This happens whether Christians accept it or not. Therefore, they should accept the situation rather than find reasons to deny or invent excuses to ignore it, including the spurious charge that it promotes relativism. But this charge does remind us that accepting the situation also means taking the truth question—the question, “Why do you believe this is true?”—seriously. The Christian account of everything is more than one way to interpret life, society, the universe, and anything and everything else. It claims the *true* way. Of course, normal nihilism means that some, like Bryan Magee, will care about the truth question, while others will be inclined to dismiss our claims as merely another set of values.

Why do Christians believe this? The answer is “Jesus.” The Christian account of everything is the story of God and his creation. Christians account for all things as the creation of their God, something he made freely and for his own delight. After evil and sin corrupted and marred his creation, God resolved to redeem it. To do this, God sent his own Son. Here is where the account of everything and its truth converge. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, came to announce and establish God’s redeeming rule over all things, but he was not believed. He was deemed to be false. Instead he was rejected and crucified. But God raised him from the dead. Christ’s resurrection both proved him and all that stood for to be true, including this account of God and his creation. Now ascended to the right hand of God, Christ will one day return to complete his mission, to the glory of God and for the everlasting blessedness of his followers. This account not only engages normal nihilism, but it gives evangelism its message and purpose: to tell about the universe as the creation of the one true God, to announce its subjection to judgment and redemption through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and to proclaim repentance so that many might indeed turn, receive the grace of God in faith, and look for the resurrection of the dead

and the life of the world to come.³⁴ It also gives preaching and worship their content and aim: to imagine all things, including themselves, as the creation of the God who creates and redeems according to this grand story of everything, and to interpret all events and prospects, including their own lives, within this story. It also gives rise to both a coherent body of Christian doctrine and a consistent and convincing approach to ongoing theological reflection, because all theology arises from the questions, confusions, problems, and challenges that this very story generates and that this very story resolves.³⁵

4. Nihilism means competition. For this reason, one might ask whether we make any real progress if we cannot find decisive arguments for our account and/or against other accounts of everything like Buddhism or materialism. But it must be remembered that, at the level of the highest values, there are no close-out arguments, because nothing by definition can stand higher to be in judgment. There is nowhere outside of everything for human creatures to decide on which is right or at least better. Arguments do remain, but they will be limited. Their overall aim should be constructive rather than critical, and persuasive rather than defensive, although some criticism and refutation will always be involved.
5. Moreover, Christians should think beyond competition and arguments. They also should appreciate that they are in a situation where constantly and principally testify to the truth about God and creation—about everything—by their own *truthfulness*.

This is a matter of the *Christian life*. The Creeds already gesture toward the contours of a life that is true, because they confess God as the Creator and Jesus as Lord. The Lutheran Catechisms make this explicit for truthful, faithful lives. They teach that God being the Creator means “God made me and all creatures,” and it implies that “it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey him.” They teach that Jesus being Lord means he “has redeemed me,” and this implies that “I live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.” Leading such lives are good in themselves, because they are faithful to God and Christ.

Leading such lives are also good in our situation in two ways. First, they reflect our faith in God the Creator and Jesus as Lord. They testify to the truth about God. Second, they are also good for our neighbors. The Christian life toward others is principally a life of love. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This is always good, but it is also a concrete and natural way to resist nihilism’s devaluations. Showing love to others treats others as values.

Endnotes

- 1 Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, vol. 229, no. 1379 (Nov. 1964): 77–86. A longer version was published in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965).
- 2 Terry Eagleton, *Materialism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 102–103. The Nietzsche quotation is from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 116.
- 3 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 113–114.
- 4 *Ibid.*, chapter 9, esp. 117–118.
- 5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 7. I recognize that this document is a controversial and speculative construction from Nietzsche's late notebooks. But for my purposes, doubts and objections to *The Will to Power* will not matter. I have sought to refer to Nietzsche fairly, and, as I will explain, I am isolating nihilism from the historical argument in which Nietzsche locates it, and from the social agenda for which he advances the idea.
- 6 Malcolm Bull, *Anti-Nietzsche* (London and New York: Verso, 2011), 55–56.
- 7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §347, trans. with commentary by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 289.
- 8 Malcolm Bull's *Anti-Nietzsche* is a clear example of this kind of engagement.
- 9 Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 9.
- 10 Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, §58. In *Twilight of the Idols*, 182.
- 11 The examples of "values" mentioned here come from this passage in *The Anti-Christ*, §9: "I make war on this theologian instinct: I have found traces of it everywhere. Whoever has theologian blood in his veins has a wrong and dishonest attitude towards all things from the very first. The pathos that develops out of this is called *faith*: closing one's eyes with respect to oneself for good and all so as not to suffer from the sight of incurable falsity. Out of this erroneous perspective on all things one makes a morality, a virtue, a holiness for oneself, one unites the good conscience with seeing *falsely*—one demands no *other* kind of perspective shall be accorded any value after one has rendered one's own sacrosanct with the names 'God,' 'redemption,' 'eternity.'" In *Twilight of the Idols*, 120. Both *Twilight* and *The Anti-Christ* bear references to the "revaluation of all values," so what Nietzsche meant by "values" is clear in those books, as are other examples of the highest values.
- 12 Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011). "Secular age" in this case alludes to Charles Taylor's account of secularism and secularization in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 13 "[I]f what we mean by being a Christian really is being a Christian—what then is God? He is the most comical being that ever lived, His Word the most comical book that ever has come to light: to set heaven and earth in motion (as He does in His Word), so threaten with hell, with eternal punishment . . . in order to attain what we understand by being Christians (and we indeed are true Christians)—no, nothing so comical ever occurred! Imagine that a man with a loaded pistol stepped up to a person and said to him, 'I'll shoot you dead,' or imagine something still more terrible, that he were to say, 'I'll seize upon your person and torture you to death in the most dreadful manner, if you do not (now be on the watch, for here it comes) . . . make your own life here on earth as profitable and enjoyable as you possibly can.'" Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christianity*, trans. with an introduction by Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946), 110.
- 14 Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1983), 21, 74, 90.
- 15 Bryan Magee, *Confessions of a Philosopher* (New York: Random House, 1998), 347–348.

- 16 Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 239.
- 17 Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 162.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 163–164.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 164.
- 20 From the “Foreword” to *Twilight of the Idols*. Nietzsche, *Twilight/Anti-Christ*, 21.
- 21 Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 14.
- 22 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 23 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 40–41.
- 24 James C. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism* (State College, PA: Penn State University Press, 1997). Dreyfus and Kelly’s All Things Shining, mentioned earlier, is another helpful account of nihilism and contemporary life.
- 25 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 5.
- 26 Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things*, 59.
- 27 Edwards, Dreyfus and Kelly, Taylor, and others (e.g., Richard Rorty) have all underscored this change as a radical shift in Western culture.
- 28 Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things*, 45–46.
- 29 For a proposal for confessionalism in this sense, see my article “Making Sense of Confessionalism,” *Concordia Journal* 41, no. 1 (2015): 34–48.
- 30 C. S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, rev. and expanded ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 92.
- 31 Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Fate of Theism,” in *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1969), 24.
- 32 For more about the doctrine of the Trinity in the contemporary situation, see Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, Inc., 1970), 10–11, and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 280–299. For more about the current situation on the theology of the word, see Peter H. Nafzger, *These Are Written: Toward a Cruciform Theology of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013).
- 33 See above about nihilism as an objective social condition.
- 34 I have discussed this at greater length in “Evangelism in an Age of Normal Nihilism,” *Missio Apostolica* 22 (2014): 33–43. See esp. 39–42.
- 35 I have discussed this at greater length, although still quite briefly, in “Making Sense of Confessionalism.”

OK, So It's Not Righteous . . . But What Do I *Do* with My Anger? Reflections on Anger in the Christian Life

Jeffrey Gibbs



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In 2015 I offered up a fairly simple study of what the Bible actually says about human anger, which was published at *ConcordiaTheology.org*. Surprisingly (to me at least), it led to a significant amount of discussion online; it appeared I struck a nerve. In light of what I have gleaned from that ongoing discussion, I offer the following further reflections.

By way of summary, most of that previous study focused on the teaching found in the New Testament. What emerged as the *title* of the study—“The Myth of Righteous Anger”—was not at all in my mind when I began the essay. I began because I wanted to understand more fully, what the Bible actually said about anger in the lives of human beings, and specifically in the lives of Christians. The focus (and title) shifted, however, because so many friends and acquaintances seemed to assume that the Bible clearly taught an important category that without exception they all labelled “righteous anger.” Hard to define, “righteous anger” seemed to be functioning in people’s minds as “justifiable anger” that did not involve sin—or at least, not very much sin. If I became outraged and acted in that anger with angry words and deeds, well, that was all right. That was excusable and barely required apology (much less repentance)—because I was speaking or acting out of my *righteous* anger.

I looked for a biblical basis for such a category. Different writers point to God’s own anger at sin and evil, as well as to Jesus’s anger (especially when the Lord overturned the tables in the temple precincts). The logic then would go something like this: if sinless Persons such as God the Father or God the Son got angry, then

there is such a thing as non-sinful, that is, *righteous* anger. Therefore this must be a helpful and operative category for us as well, and surely we believers can also experience and express such righteous anger. And there are other texts that people employed to identify such a teaching in the Scriptures.

I concluded, however, that these attempts to find in the Bible a positive teaching concerning human, righteous anger were weak at best, and many of the arguments collapsed quickly. Most (if not all) of the textual evidence was indirect, descriptive/narrative, and implicit, and it depended on flawed logic for the most part. More importantly, however, the Scriptures contain plenty of direct teaching about human anger. More than a few statements either explicitly warn of the dangers

of human anger or (more frequently) simply equate anger with sinning. In the Old Testament, the book of Proverbs is the chief source for direct teaching about human anger. Proverbs strongly expresses the sinfulness, yes, even the folly of anger. In the New Testament, Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:21–26) and a number of passages in Paul's letters (e.g., Eph 4:31; Gal 5:20–21) offer the same evaluation. In the earlier study, I laid out the teaching in relatively full detail. Here I will only summarize it, before offering a few personal and pastoral reflections. For a greater or lesser extent, all of God's children have to deal with anger in their lives.

THE MYTH OF "RIGHTEOUS ANGER"

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS
ABOUT HUMAN ANGER

JEFFREY GIBBS

concordiapages

A PDF of Dr. Gibbs' first essay can be downloaded at www.concordiatheology.org.

The New Testament directly says two things about human anger. First, it simply equates it with sin, listing it with other vices such as greed or envy or sexual immorality. This is the NT's most common way of speaking, and we must take it seriously. There are no direct statements or teachings from the NT (as far as I am aware) that give a positive evaluation of human anger. To the contrary, things run strongly in the other direction.

Second, both Paul (Eph 4:25-27) and James (Jas 1:19-20) can be understood to describe anger as spiritually dangerous, and as fertile ground for sin—but perhaps not necessarily as sin in itself. The well-known passage from Ephesians says (ESV), “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger and give no opportunity to the devil.” James's words are as follows (ESV): “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires.” Neither of these passages, of course, endorses anger or even comes close to labelling it “righteous.” They warn that anger is spiritually perilous, and they teach what will happen soon once I am angry. A natural inference from this is that I need to find a way to get rid of my anger, to deal with it.

It's this second way of thinking about human anger (perhaps implied in Eph 4:25–27 and Jas 1:19–20) that I would like to employ in the rest of this reflection. It's a modern commonplace, actually: “Emotions are morally neutral; it's what we *do* with them that is right or wrong.” Something like that may be in the background in Ephesians 4 and James 1. Even if Paul and James were not intending to make that point, however, I still think that it is a crucially important way to think about all of our emotions: fear, anger, contentment, joy, relief, and so on. In themselves, our emotions are spontaneous reactions to some stimulus or event, whether externally located or internally perceived. We can choose to do either evil or good with any emotion. It's just that anger seems to be particularly volatile—at least, that's one explanation for why the Bible says what it says. (By the way, thinking this way about our emotions in general and about anger in particular leaves no conceptual room for regarding anger as “righteous.” If anger as an emotion is morally neutral in and of itself, then it can't be bad or good, unrighteous or righteous.)

Let me add one further comment here. In saying that our emotions are morally neutral, I mean something close to a statement like this: “Our hands and feet are morally neutral.” Hands, feet, and emotions are all part of what it means to be human, created by God to live in this world. It is a *good* thing to be human—though not, of course, to be sinful. To be embodied is God's good design, and this would include our emotional lives. It's part of who we are. Presumably Adam and Eve experienced emotions before the fall, and presumably we will experience emotions in the resurrection of the body—though the full range we now know will be smaller, for God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. In what I am about to say about anger, then, I do not mean to suggest that it is wrong or defective to experience emotions

per se. To the contrary! But neither can we assume that any given emotion will produce and empower a holy choice. Profound happiness and contentment, after all, can be motivations to commit adultery, if that is what a person experiences when they are with their co-fornicator.

A Four-fold Reflection on the Emotion of Anger

As a Christian, what shall I do when I am angry? The first thing is to realize it, to admit that it is the case. Here it's important not to deceive myself with words. Whether I call it irritation, frustration, or whatever, it's important to admit that I am angry. And it's pretty common. In my view, American culture has come to value and even extol this emotion—often termed “outrage”—and to applaud people who feel it. One gets a little weary of it. When I hear on the news about someone's outraged reaction over something, I tend to think, “Oh, that's easy. Anyone can get outraged. The hard part is doing something good.” It is crucial, however, to acknowledge anger. Nothing good can come from experiencing anger—being angry—while refusing to acknowledge it.

Denying our anger in fact brings with it considerable dangers. When it stay and stews inside me, anger quickly becomes toxic; anger is powerfully corrosive to the human spirit and to human relationships. If I ignore or deny that I am angry, then I will begin to act it out whether I want to or not. To be transparent here, that was one of the motivations for my original study. I was being angry (and not in morally neutral ways) as I lived with my dear wife, even though she was not directly connected to what was causing my anger. By grace I realized that this ought not to be, and I realized that I needed to deal with my anger and its causes in a different way. Anger is volatile. Anger aimed outward quickly leads to sinful words, insults, character assassination; anger aimed inward can produce depression and self-loathing. In fully developed form, it can lead to violence and every manner of evil. Nothing good comes from denying our anger. We must name it, own it, and take responsibility for it. It's pay now or pay later—and the price is higher later.

Second, then, after owning up to anger in my life I need to deal with it. Here we enter the realm of dealing with our emotions and with emotional trauma. I freely admit that I have no specialized training in these areas. I have the average amount of expertise in this area, gleaned from pastoral ministry experience and in my own attempts to grow as a person and as a Christian. Here, however are a few thoughts.

In my view, American culture has come to value and even extol this emotion—often termed “outrage”—and to applaud people who feel it. One gets a little weary of it.

Sometimes our emotions, of course, are as fleeting as they are spontaneous; anger can be like that. A person cuts me off in traffic, I get mad and I act it out with words or gestures. I didn't think about it; it just happened before I saw it coming or going. And when it's gone, well—it's gone. It doesn't seem to linger with me, and it's too late to do anything about it. All I can do is repent that I cursed someone who is made in the likeness of God (Jas 3:9) and for whom Christ Jesus bore the curse of the law (Gal 3:13).

I can search, however, for ways to prepare for the next time that sequence might happen. I heard a man say once that he had worked on developing this habit. When someone did something foolish in traffic, or cut him off in traffic, he taught himself to say aloud, "Ah, well—I've done that sort of thing, too." That habit helped to diffuse the reaction and over time, even to prevent the anger from happening. In its place was a sort of rueful shake of the head. And a calm humility. A happier ending, if you will.

There are many not so happy or easy endings, of course. At other times in our lives, emotions come from deeper inside of us, and they are not so easily handled. After verifying the following insight with a couple of counselor friends, I have come to think of anger—especially if it recurs or seems out of proportion to what triggered it—as a "secondary" or derivative reaction. I mean that anger can be a symptom of another hurt that was inflicted sometime in the past. Whether it is a fear, or a profound rejection, a deep loss or some other grief, these emotion-laden experiences can cook away down there inside of us until they are ready to erupt to the surface almost without warning—and also without control. Perhaps not all of my readers have experienced this out of proportion, "where-did-THAT-come-from?" anger, but perhaps many have. I know that I have.

In these cases, we need help. Pastoral care can offer compassionate listening as well as absolution for the sins that need to be confessed. Trained Christian counselors can help to ferret out the causes for which anger is a symptom. Once ferreted out, the wounds can be exposed to the light and air of knowledge, forgiveness, and acceptance. And I can begin to move forward. I won't be able to *not* experience anger. But it can lessen, and I can grow in my ability to choose what I do with that anger. To paraphrase James slightly, I can become *slower* to anger; I can learn to choose not to sin, even though I am angry.

Third, given the fact that all humans remain flawed, sinful creatures and that even Christians until the Day of Christ struggle with the flesh, the world, and the devil, we should say this: properly understood, sometimes anger is "justifiable." I don't mean it is "righteous." Anger is always corrosive, and quickly leads to sinful words, thoughts, and actions. But one of the things that we can say to each other as believers is that anger is *understandable*; sometimes it *fits* the situation. If I find myself responding in rage and am tempted to vent that rage (especially) on people who are perpetrating evil, at least I don't have to feel alone. Others would feel that same fury. It doesn't mean I am weird, or beyond the grace of God, or beyond healing. To hearken back to my first point, it does no good to deny that we are angry. It can do

great *harm* to pretend otherwise. It should not surprise us when we are, especially in response to great and public evil.

Fourth, it is also important to realize that anger can sometimes be very, very tenacious. Not every person is afflicted with it in the same way. Not every person reacts with anger when confronted with evil. To pick just one example, sometimes Christians who are confronted directly with evils like abortion or racism react with sorrow, or with compassion. They don't feel anger—they just don't. Other Christians, however, do respond with outrage and anger. And to be sure, that volatile, powerful emotion provides energy, and that energy may or may not be channeled in God-pleasing directions. It's just important to acknowledge that some people are prone to anger—it's hard for them to rid themselves of it, no matter how much they might want to do so. If that's the case, well, then that is the case. Believers thus afflicted will simply have to take responsibility in appropriate ways.

Conclusion

Toward the end of “The Myth of Righteous Anger” are these words:

In the end, for a Christian the Bible's teaching needs to lead the way. Anger is not to be extolled in our lives or in our discourse. Anger quickly becomes sin, and we simply must think in those terms. It is hard to do, given the [cultural] climate in which we find ourselves. We will have opportunities, however, to show ourselves to be different, Spirit-filled sorts of persons who respond with good when others have done evil, who leave vengeance in the hands where it belongs—in God's hands.

When I see a brother or sister who is in the grip of anger, I can draw near in empathy. In some ways (or perhaps in many), I have been in that place as well. I can offer words of encouragement, words of understanding, words of forgiveness. Together we can seek to honor the Bible's teaching about human anger, and live in humility with one another and with our neighbor. By grace, we can learn to be people who turn away from anger, who work to set aside outrage and the desire to repay evil for evil. Even as our God in Christ has turned aside his anger against us, we can do the same for others—and so be the daughters and sons of our Father who is in heaven.

Homiletical Helps

The Functions of Jesus's Miracles

Francis C. Rossow

The first four books of the New Testament contain numerous accounts of miracles performed by Jesus. Approximately half of Mark's gospel, for example, is devoted to the narration of Jesus's miracles.

Given the amount of space accorded Jesus's miracles in the four Gospels, a concern has arisen about the lesser amount of attention accorded them in contemporary preaching. I am not aware of any statistical corroboration for this alleged disproportion, but I wouldn't be surprised if the concern has validity. Although no one should expect a precise correlation between the quantity of space the Gospels assign to Jesus's miracles and the quantity of preaching devoted to the subject, it seems reasonable to expect considerable emphasis in our sermons on a matter that the Scriptures consider so important

There are many reasons for this possible disproportion in contemporary preaching, not the least of which is the skepticism of our age about the miraculous. More charitably, however, I suspect that for the more conscientious proclaimer of biblical truth a reluctance to preach about miracles may arise from an unawareness of the homiletical riches the Gospel miracle accounts contain. If, let us say, the only thing a preacher understands about a miracle—and make no mistake about it, it's a thing worth understanding—is that Jesus's miracles demonstrate his deity and support his messianic claims, that preacher may hesitate to proclaim that truth about the miracles overly for fear of grinding an axe or of boring his audience.

Assuming this unawareness to be a contributing cause for infrequent preaching on Jesus's miracles, I plan to explore in this article some of the homiletical riches that the Gospel accounts of Jesus's miracles contain. My hope is to broaden our homiletical horizons. If we have more to say about the miracles of Jesus, it is likely that we will not only preach about them more frequently but also preach about them more insightfully.

Careful study of the text, in its original Greek if possible, is of course the best

way to tap the wealth of riches in a given account of one of Jesus's miracles. Another way, the way I am proposing in this article, is to ask, "Why did Jesus perform miracles? What motivated him? How did the miracles serve his mission?"

The Evidential Function

The function of Jesus's miracles most familiar to Christians, especially older Christians, is what has been called the *evidential* or the *apologetic* role of the miracles. That is, Jesus's miracles demonstrate that he is what he claimed to be, the Son of God, the promised Messiah who came to our world to provide eternal salvation for sin-stricken humanity. Jesus's miracles are credentials for his deity.

Many of us learned this truth from our parents or in Sunday school. St. Peter in a sermon spoke of Jesus of Nazareth as "a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you" (Acts 2:22). Of the first of Jesus's miracles recorded, changing water into wine, St. John writes, "This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him" (Jn 2:11). After Jesus subdued a storm endangering the lives of some disciples in a boat on a lake, those disciples exclaimed, "What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mk 4:41). The answer expected (but not stated): This isn't the manner of *man*, but rather the manner of *God*. A paralyzed man is brought before Jesus; Jesus forgives his sins; some of the witnesses doubt that he has the power to do that, so Jesus replies, "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—"Rise, pick up your bed and go home" (Mt 9:6)—and the man does! Near the end of his account of Jesus's life, St. John admits that he has omitted many of the miracles Jesus performed, but then adds that the miracles he has included were "written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ" (Jn 20:31).

Obviously, there is an abundance of biblical evidence for the evidential function of Jesus's miracles, and, therefore, we need not be apologetic about their apologetic role. Yet systems of evidence, "proofs" for biblical truth, seem to have fallen on hard days. Rational approaches to religious issues have been marginalized in contemporary culture. There were times in the early part of the twentieth century when the Christian church may have been obsessed with the evidential function of Jesus's miracles. Such certainly is no longer the case—and this despite the popularity of C. S. Lewis's delightfully lucid apologetic works. (Might there be fads even in theology?)

To a degree (but only to a degree) this shift is justified. Our Lord himself warned against "seeking a sign" (Mt 16:4). He did not approve of "people from Missouri" (how serendipitously applicable that geographical reference in the cliché to myself and to the bulk of my readers) "people from Missouri" with a chip on their shoulder and a "show-me" attitude. He preferred a more personal relationship between people and himself, one based more on love and trust than on logic. The reaction he desired to his miracles was tears of repentance rather than whistles of amazement. Sometimes

Jesus requested the beneficiaries of his miracles *not* to publicize them, a request that seems puzzling if the evidential aspect of his miracles is their only function. He did not accede to the demand of his enemies during his crucifixion to step down from the cross to prove that he was God. Certainly, we remember our Lord's mild reproof of Thomas when he insisted on empirical evidence for Christ's resurrection: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (Jn 20:29). (Yet we must not forget that in the very same context Jesus supplied the evidence that Thomas demanded [Jn 20:27]).

The trouble does not lie in the quality of the evidence. It, rather, lies in the limitations of our response to that evidence. As Martin Luther has pointed out, we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus or come to him, but the Holy Spirit must empower us to do so through the good news of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. Sin has crippled the power of human reason. Although this factor does not render useless the evidential function of Jesus's miracles (the Holy Spirit's conversion activity involving *all* our human responses), still it does seem to limit any exclusive reliance on the evidential role.

The Compassion Factor

Fortunately, there are other functions of Jesus's miracles. One equally familiar to Christians is their role as a demonstration of Jesus's love, mercy, and compassion. Jesus's miracles have been called his "method of philanthropy." This facet of Jesus's miracles gives them stature. Jesus *sees* a need and can't help but respond. This, for example, is what prompted the feeding of the five thousand (Mk 8:2). A cry from someone along the wayside, a woman touches his garment—and another miracle occurs! So often Jesus's miracles are spontaneous rather than planned. As a rule, they seem to be a response to a specific problem rather than a detail in a master plan. One would like to believe that our omniscient Lord was not always aware of the number of miracles he was going to do on a given day, that his right hand was not always aware of what his left hand was doing (a conclusion compatible with the doctrine of his *kenosis*). Jesus's miracles show his love as well as his power. In performing miracles our Lord was not merely flexing his messianic muscles (to put it irreverently); he was, above all, demonstrating what in fact the Scriptures say he is, namely, "God is love."

The Typological Function

A less familiar, but intriguing facet of Jesus's miracles is their *typological* function, a function brought to my attention by a former student, Mark Schuler, in a brilliant study a number of years ago. It was his observation that many of the miracles of Jesus's earthly ministry foreshadowed the ultimate miracle of Jesus's atoning crucifixion and saving resurrection. The miracles of his ministry were type; his death and resurrection were antitype. The miracles recorded in the four Gospels are not as random as they may appear; they are all of a piece. The miracles prior to Jesus's

death and resurrection contained the same good news so abundant in his death and resurrection. They were the same in kind, only different in degree. The gospel was a common denominator in all of Jesus's miracles. The miracles of Jesus's ministry were previews of that coming attraction, the death and resurrection of our Lord, "appetizers" for that climactic finish of our Lord's mission.

An obvious example of the typological dimension of a miracle is the resurrection of the widow's son narrated in Luke 7:11–17. Clearly, the miracle demonstrates Jesus's deity since no mere human being can restore life to a dead person. Just as clearly, the miracle highlights the mercy and love of our Lord. What can better show the compassion of Jesus than restoring to life a widow's only son? But the miracle is also typological; it foreshadows the resurrection of God's Son, who happens to be God's only Son and loved even as the widow of Nain loved her son.

Given this understanding of Jesus's miracles, we see them as the gospel made visible. The miracle becomes the message. The miracles are indeed what the Scriptures often call them: "signs," concrete, dramatic representations of the gospel in words. Jesus's miracles, therefore, demonstrate not only that Jesus is God but also *a certain kind of God*, a God who cares, a God who loves, a God who saves. This typological understanding of the miracles weds their evidential and compassionate roles—something like putting Humpty Dumpty together again.

Mark Schuler's contribution provides new insight into the meaning of John 20:30–31: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." I had always viewed this passage only through my evidential spectacles. Thanks to Schuler's thesis, I could now see the same passage in an additional light. "But these [miracle accounts] are written, that you may *believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God"—"believe" not only because the miracles are evidence but also because the miracles are gospel!

Consider how this typological perspective can enrich our preaching. In sermon preparation, the pastor will examine every miracle account in the context of the ultimate miracle of Jesus's death and resurrection. The pastor will attempt to draw a line between a specific miracle Jesus performed during his ministry and his cross and empty tomb. It may not always be possible to do so; certainly the pastor won't "cheat" in this exegetical work, but neither will the pastor quit too soon in this analysis of the miracle account. If there is a mere trace of gospel in the account, the pastor will ferret it out in the determination to preach only Christ and him crucified and risen.

A Corollary Function

A corollary to the typological role of Jesus's miracles is a thesis advanced by James Kallas in his book *The Significance of the Synoptic Miracles*. According to Kallas, the basic function of the miracles of Jesus's ministry was to herald the imminent arrival

of God's kingdom and the subsequent demise of Satan's kingdom. Many of Jesus's miracles foreshadowed Satan's ultimate defeat by means of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection (a specific kind of typology, if you will). To put it simply, Jesus's miracles constituted war on Satan. The first messianic prophecy in the Bible foretold this war. Soon after Satan had introduced sin into the world, God said to him, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gn 3:15). Our Lord describes the outcome of this classic, cataclysmic confrontation between the prince of peace and the prince of darkness thus: "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man, fully armed [Satan] guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when one stronger [Jesus] than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil" (Lk 11:20–22).

Kallas's view immediately solves two puzzles. The first is the surprising frequency of casting out devils in Jesus's ministry as well as the fact that this particular miracle is sometimes singled out for special attention in the context of other miracles described only generically. (See, for example, Mk 1:32 and 34, Mk 1:7, and Acts 10:38.) Kallas's view solves this puzzle. If Jesus's miracles are indeed war on Satan, it is predictable that there will be numerous skirmishes during that war—hence the frequency of casting out devils as well as emphasizing that particular miracle. The second mystery is the strange coupling together in the biblical record of the casting out of devils and the preaching of the gospel. (See Mk 1:39 and 6:12–13.) Why this strange combination? What fellowship has the casting out of devils with the preaching of the gospel? No problem, as Kallas sees it. If the miracles of Jesus are indeed war with Satan, then the preaching of the gospel constitutes the declaration of war and the casting out devils the acts of war. Or to state the same truth in a positive way, the preaching of the gospel is the description of God's kingdom and the casting out of devils the demonstration of that kingdom. The one is verbal, the other visual.

Kallas's thesis, in addition, makes Satan's temptation of Jesus at the very start of his ministry more understandable. It is always somewhat jarring to the reader of the Bible to see Jesus, right after God the Father's stirring approval of him at his baptism by John, whisked off to the wilderness for an exposure to a forty-day temptation by Satan. What an untoward beginning for one's ministry! To Kallas this is to be expected. If the prince of peace and the prince of darkness, protagonist and antagonist respectively, are engaged in classic warfare, then it is no surprise that there should be a major battle at the very start of that struggle, Satan hoping to nip Jesus's mission in the bud and avert his own defeat in Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection.

Was Satan's attempt offensive or defensive? Was Satan guilty of hubris? Or was he desperate? Two answers are possible. Contemporary theology seems to regard Satan's attempt as arrogance, that he really thought he could conquer the Son of God. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread," he

said. The “if” was meant for Jesus, to instill in him doubts about his own deity and his relationship with God the Father. If Jesus could not do what Satan demanded, or could do so only for the wrong reasons, the war would be over and Satan could revel in his early victory. Older theology seemed to regard Satan’s attempt as a sign of desperation. Was this Jesus the promised seed who would crush Satan’s head? Satan wasn’t sure, and he’s got to know. In Milton’s words, “Hoping for the best, he [Satan] risks the worst.” The “if” in Satan’s demand now reflects Satan’s own fears and doubts. If Jesus could not perform the miracle Satan requested, or could do so only for the wrong reasons, Satan could breathe a sigh of relief and relax for a few more eons. His time had not yet come.

This war between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness continued for the three years following Satan’s temptation of Jesus and reached its climax during Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection. Imagine how Satan may have viewed the cross event. Here was his rival at the mercy of his enemies, about to die, forsaken by his disciples and, worst of all, forsaken by the very God Jesus claimed was his Father. Civil war, as Satan saw it, had broken out in the camp of Satan’s enemy: Father against Son and Son against Father. In accord with that ancient prophecy, Jesus’s heel was being bruised. Perhaps symbolic of the “apparent” victory for the kingdom of darkness was the phenomenal darkness that occurred during our Savior’s execution. It looked like Satan’s round.

Ignoring or overlooking the remainder of the Genesis 3:15 prophecy, Satan three days later is confronted with the unexpected: Jesus’s triumphant resurrection from death. Also in accord with the Genesis 3:15 prophecy, Satan’s head has been crushed. His power is broken. Definitely Jesus’s round. The war is over, and Jesus declares that war to be over in his descent into hell when he announces to the Enemy that he, Jesus, has emerged as *Christus Victor*. Mission accomplished!

Even the Sabbath miracles grow in meaning in Kallas’s thesis. Why did Jesus perform so many miracles on the Sabbath day? One answer, Kallas speculates, is to show that God is through resting. This is all-out war with Satan. God is on duty full time, around the clock, seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. No respite. No quarter given. Thus, miracles also on the Sabbath. Another answer Kallas supplies is that the six days of the seven-day week symbolize the original world that God created in six days, then rested on the seventh. Call it the six-day world. That six-day world is the world that Satan despoiled with his introduction of evil. Now Jesus has come to our earth not merely to retrieve that world but also to renew it, re-create it, making it the eternal abode for himself, his angels, and his redeemed people. To signify that radical renewal Jesus does miracles also on the seventh day, the Sabbath. Call it the seventh-day world!

The Didactic Function

The last function of the miracles of Jesus's earthly ministry we are considering has been called the *didactic* function. Many of Jesus's miracles teach a lesson or convey a moral. A good example of this aspect of Jesus's miracles is the miraculous catch of fish in Luke 5. While this miracle clearly exemplifies Jesus's deity as well as his compassion for his disciples' failure to catch fish the night before, Jesus emphasized that he performed this miracle to teach an important truth, namely, that just as Jesus's help was essential for the catch of fish, so his help is necessary in our evangelism efforts. "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men" (Lk 5:10). Alan Richardson describes the miracle accounts as "enacted parables," that is, historical events designed to convey a specific spiritual truth.

This didactic function can even be inferred from miracles where no moral is specifically stated. Thus, for example, preachers have seen in the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter also a lesson on the value of persistent prayer, based on the woman's refusal to discontinue her request for the healing of her daughter and on Jesus's commendation of her strong faith. When Jesus heals a leper, a miracle in which the evidential and compassionate aspects of Jesus miracles are so prominent, preachers have further seen in Jesus's action the biblical truth that as leprosy ostracizes a person from human society, so "the leprosy of sin" ostracizes us from the presence of the holy God; even better, the fact that Jesus touches the leper demonstrates the gospel truth that Jesus is willing to take upon himself the uncleanness of our sins.

Although treating a miracle didactically can often lead to insightful preaching, there is, simultaneously, a danger in the attempt, the danger of reducing a miraculous event to a fictitious story designed to make a point. A miracle may be profoundly symbolic, yes, but we must not reduce it to a mere symbol or non-occurrence. Jonah's experience in the innards of a great sea creature may teach all sorts of lessons about obedience to God and a zeal for mission work, but the truth remains that Jonah was in fact swallowed by a huge fish and miraculously delivered by God from the same. In explaining the spiritual significance of a miracle, we must not explain the miracle away or trivialize it. In our search for meaning from a miracle, we must never nullify its historicity, its facticity, the ingredient that distinguishes a miracle from a parable. A miraculously filled stomach (as in the feeding of the five thousand) remains a miraculously filled stomach no matter how much the miracle teaches us about the ability of Jesus also to satiate our spiritual hunger (an additional truth that Jesus himself points out in the context immediately following John's account of that particular miracle).

Because the miracles of Jesus serve many functions, it does not follow that every miracle Jesus did performs all these functions. While it is good to view each miracle of Jesus in the context of all its possible functions, we must not "force" a particular miracle to serve every possible function. Nevertheless, it is my hope that greater awareness of the many functions Jesus's miracles can serve will enrich our preaching

on the miracles “to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people” and, above all, enhance their understanding of the saving gospel.

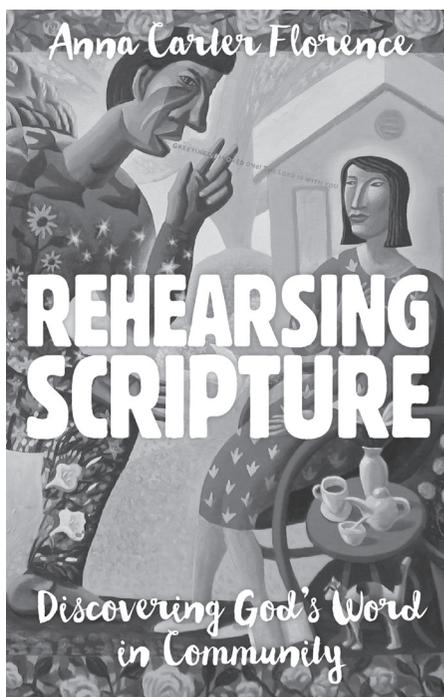
Reviews

REHEARSING SCRIPTURE. By Anna Carter Florence. Eerdmans, 2018. Paper. 215 pages. \$16.99.

At a seminary somewhere down south, there's a class called "Back to the Text." The class goal is for the students to perform (retell and reenact) the book of the Bible they've been reading aloud and studying all semester. The experience leaves a mark: "By the end of the semester, when we perform the Scripture, we're fiercely in love with it; it's inside us, and we carry it everywhere" (155). If your life aim is to see people marked by an encounter with the God of the Bible—fiercely in love with the word—read *Rehearsing Scripture*, by Anna Carter Florence.

In this book, Florence approaches Scripture not merely as information, but *also* as art. She follows a trajectory of works like Alter's *The Art of the Biblical Narrative* (1981), Sternberg's *The Poetics of the Biblical Narrative* (1987), and Long's *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (1988). In line with these, Florence advocates a theatrical approach to the Bible. She offers practices for churches to "discover the script in Scripture" and become like repertory companies—small bands of actors who perform together regularly so they can say something true (8–9).

You probably agree that approaching Scripture *merely* as art is a mistake. More fully, Scripture communicates saving knowledge of the God who has acted definitively in *history*. The Bible gives testimony about real persons, places, and events. *And* it does so with artistic



and literary genius. *Rehearsing Scripture* would have us focus on the artistry without asking us to let go of the history. Like us, Florence is dissatisfied with "historical criticism or any of its robust offspring, which will offer you a good read at a cruising altitude at 39,000 feet." These methods let us "simply admire the view and go home" (30). What we need is to have our feet planted in the world of the Bible because it is the *real* world.

Distinct from distancing methods (Bible-as-information-only), Florence explores "rehearsal" as a metaphor for Bible study. "When we read Scripture as a community, we're doing the same thing that musicians do at band practice, or singers do at choir practice, or actors do in rehearsal: going through the script and practicing ways to play it. Reading the

score and learning the notes. Running the lines and building a character” (12). This would be a welcome change from many of the Bible studies I’ve led. We learned some interesting facts about the ancient world and Greek grammar then sharpened a point of Lutheran doctrine. We heard the word, but stopped short of performing it, like the man who looks in a mirror, then “goes away and forgets what he looks like” (Jas 1:24).

Florence would help us do better. She offers simple, tested techniques for lay people and pastors to engage Scripture as a community. When Scripture becomes our script, God’s word shapes our conversation. This can help our congregations recover a neglected means of grace—the “mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters” (Smalcald Articles, III.4). When it comes to creating saving faith in Jesus, the Lutheran Confessors held this holy conversation with preaching, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod laypeople are not as well equipped as they should be to administer this saving grace. It doesn’t have to be this way. “When the body of Christ is a repertory church, versed in the script that is Scripture, we become community readers for the sake of the world” (12).

Ok, maybe you’re having trouble getting past the “Bible as art” thing. Consider this parable: There are two groups of thirsty people. One group is camped at a well that’s going dry. Having developed the site over many years, they don’t want to leave. Instead, they travel to a distant river to retrieve water for

their drying well. Floating on that same river is the second group. Carried along to where the river leads, they are running out of bottled water. The river is moving them, but they hadn’t considered letting it quench their thirst.

This parable helps me understand why I am simultaneously drawn to and repelled from the “Bible as art” approach. I perceive that my church body is like that thirsty group huddled on the raft in the river. In this story, the river is God’s totalizing, master narrative centered on Jesus—the crucified, risen, ruling, and returning Jesus of history, not a demythologized “Christ of faith.” This Jesus is revealed in the narratives, poetry, and epistles of the Bible, which flow together like a grand river leading to his kingdom which has no end. As a group, the LCMS has cast off from modern and postmodern narratives of social liberation, progress, and self-actualization. From our raft, we can see other groups muddling in these dead-end storylines, their sources running dry.

Those who would treat the Bible as art *only* are like the groups that left the river for other modes of transport. We observe the tragedy of their story unfolding and pity them. However, from the raft, we can see some of them leading thirsty people to *drink from our river*. This intrigues us. “Why are we rationing our bottled water? There’s a river all around us!”

The LCMS and other riders on the river need books like *Rehearsing Scripture*. We shouldn’t downplay the hazards of running aground on counterfeit narratives. At the same time, we need to

return to the river, not only as a mode of transport, but to drink the living water.

Consider incorporating *Rehearsing Scripture's* methods into your church's gatherings around the word—methods such as the ten conversation starters to “read the verbs” and the six questions to help your group “say something true” and confess Christ in their vocations. If none of that's what you're looking for, Florence's interpretation of 2 Samuel 13 alone is worth the read. Most importantly, pray that God would lead us back to the text and that on-lookers would say of our members: “Those people are fiercely in love with the word. It's inside them. They carry it everywhere.”

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A HISTORY OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: Volume 3, The Enlightenment through the Nineteenth Century. Edited by Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson. Eerdmans, 2017. Hardcover. 428 pages. \$60.00.

This third volume of four projected surveys of the history of exegesis continues the high standard of rich historical reporting of the first two volumes, providing readers with the basic narrative, summaries of major works, and insights into the careers and orientations of major contributing biblical scholars. The editors again present a most helpful seventy-two page “introduction and overview” of major developments

from Baruch Spinoza and Richard Simon to the major critical voices in biblical scholarship at the turn of the twentieth century. Thirteen essays follow, addressing specific figures or focal points of the unfolding of historical criticism out of the work of Enlightenment figures in the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century.

Michael Legaspi relates the term *Enlightenment* to developing presuppositions and methods of exegesis; William Baird gives an overview of historical criticism that with Legaspi sets the framework for understanding the intellectual and cultural roots of critical approaches to Scripture in Western Europe in this period. The role of Late Protestant “Orthodoxy,” both Lutheran and Calvinist, in the origins of the Enlightenment is not assessed although increasing interest in rational argument in both confessional groups played an important part in molding the churchly nature of enlightened thought in German-speaking lands. The role of anti-Semitic tendencies in the thinking of an early critical scholar such as Hermann Samuel Reimarus remains unfortunately unexplored. Too brief a mention is given the fact that Richard Simon, the Oratorian priest who made no secret of his desire to undermine the sole authority of the Bible in order to bolster the teaching authority of the papacy, was a former Huguenot who converted to Catholicism. These lacunae do not detract from the wealth of information and analysis in the structure these two essays provide for reading the subsequent studies.

One essay recounts the development of the presentation of the Masoretic text of the Old Testament; another traces advances in textual criticism and lexicography. Essays examine the rationalist and liberal roots of the quest for the historical Jesus and give overviews of biblical interpretation in continental and American Pietism and the exegetical traditions of North America in the period. Six studies focus on individuals: Baruch Spinoza, Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, Friedrich Christian Baur, David Friedrich Strauss, Ludwig Feuerbach, Wilhelm de Wette, Karl Heinrich Graf, Julius, and Wellhausen. Each of these essays takes readers into the heart of their theorizing and arguments, with plentiful, well-chosen detail as well as reflections on the course of their careers and the milieu that shaped them. The authors reveal how deeply indebted these developments were to the Hegelian structure of thinking that perpetuated in its particular projection of reality within the context of Enlightenment optimism and concepts of progress. The cultural arrogance of the “Enlightened” Europeans and North Americans is also seldom explicitly noted and certainly not highlighted although it served as a fundamental determinant of much of this scholarship. Critical examination of how these leading figures reached their conclusions is certainly presented, but twenty-first century scholars, particularly from the Majority World, will press this kind of examination further.

This is an excellent introduction and guide to an aspect of the history of the church that continues to shape much of

the discussion of Christian theologians across the globe. The editors have done us a superb service in gathering this team of scholars to explain the content and context of schools of thought that have so profoundly altered the theological agenda of leading thinkers inside and outside the church.

Robert Kolb

**THE WILEY BLACKWELL
COMPANION TO PATRISTICS.**

Edited by Ken Parry. Wiley Blackwell, 2015. Hardcover. 530 pages. \$195.00. [Kindle version \$37.59.]

This volume is part of the larger Wiley Blackwell Companions to Religion series that brings together newly commissioned essays by leading authors in the field in order to bring the latest in scholarship on a given subject in an accessible style and format. This companion to patristics edited by Ken Parry accomplishes this task very well. He begins by orienting the reader to the nature and scope of patristic studies. He moves beyond the customary Greek and Latin authors to explore the patristic tradition in Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, and Arabic. As he notes, “The diversity of languages and cultures embraced by the Fathers was instrumental in the formation of medieval European and Middle Eastern civilization” (3). I would contend that such a study also helps us understand the modern context for these civilizations as well, even as we see them under attack by groups such as the Taliban and ISIS. Perry helps us to

see that patristics covers a wide range of genres, “including not only theology, spirituality and apologetics, but also philosophy, ecclesiology, hagiography, homiletics, liturgics, epistolography, hymnography and poetry” (5). There are individual chapters devoted to many of these subjects that will help the novice navigate through what might otherwise be a bewildering maze of terminology and figures. This is truly a *companion* to the study of patristics that not only serves as a guide for students and lay people alike who want to study patristics, but exposes them to areas of research they might not otherwise have known about or thought about studying.

Included are a couple of chapters on how the writings of the Fathers were brought into various collections. There are, for instance, the florilegia (lit. “collection of flowers,”) the gems of patristic thought brought together by various later church writers, such as the ninth-century Byzantine scholar Photius (see the article by Alexander Alexakis). Angelo DiBerardino discusses the development of the modern patrology, featuring the seventeenth-century Lutheran Johannes Gerhard (1582–1637) as one of the leading patrologists of that period. But the heart of the volume is found in the third part which explores the reception history of various individual Fathers by leading scholars in the field. Some authors are more well-known than others. There are individual chapters devoted to Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius, Ephrem of Nisibis, John Chrysostom, Augustine, and Cyril of Alexandria, but also more

obscure authors such as Shenoute of Atripe, Nestorius, Dionysius the Aeropagite, Severus of Antioch, Gregory the Great, Maximos the Confessor, John of Damascus, Gregory of Narek, and Gregory Palamas. The Cappadocian Fathers (Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil of Caesarea) are given their own treatment in a separate chapter, as are the Desert Fathers and Mothers and the Iconophile Fathers (those who wrote in support of icons being used in the church). These chapters are not primarily biographies. While they do provide details about Fathers’ lives and their writings, their larger purpose is to demonstrate how these various church fathers were received by (and influenced) subsequent generations within the church up through the Middle Ages and Reformation and into the modern period. It is fascinating to note, for instance, a church father such as Maximos the Confessor, who was virtually ignored throughout most of church history up until the twentieth century—despite the key role he had played in the later christological controversies after Chalcedon. With the discovery of certain writings of his, however, he is now the subject of intense study, with whole sections being devoted to him at patristic conferences and in publishing houses.

The final section of the volume is devoted to the topics in patristics mentioned earlier, along with studies on the church councils and how the Fathers were received by the scholastics and the Fathers of the Reformation. What is especially enlightening are

the concluding studies on the Fathers in Arabic, Greek, and Latin. Each of these chapters provides an entry point into beginning to study the Fathers in their original languages, demonstrating the nuance of the languages during different periods and highlighting the historical development of the languages throughout late antiquity.

Patristics—the study of the church fathers and their writings—had up until the last century occurred largely within the purview of the church. This volume chronicles much of that history but also challenges readers to engage the modern disciplines of our current post-structural, post-critical milieu, in order to foster “a careful reading of our sources with properly fitting lenses that enable us to notice and reflect on something new about that past and ourselves” (495). This is a laudable goal indeed, and one that this *companion* is uniquely equipped to enable.

Joel Elowsky

JESUS AND THE EYEWITNESSES:

The Gospels as Eyewitness

Testimony. By Richard Bauckham.

Second edition. Eerdmans, 2017.

Hardcover. 704 pages. \$50.00.

Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (first edition, 2006) endures in its significance and erudition, and this second edition is a welcome opportunity for the unfamiliar to pick it up and for the familiar to continue the conversation. The new edition retains the original

book's body and argument unchanged, but appends not only a new preface but also three new chapters following up on the book in light of critiques and subsequent research. These new chapters revisit Bauckham's argument that Mark tips its hat to eyewitness sources, particularly Peter (509–549), his argument that the Fourth Gospel was penned by an eyewitness present during Jesus's ministry (“the Beloved Disciple”) but likely not the prominent John of Zebedee (550–590), and, perhaps the book's most important contribution, confirms the “Death of Form Criticism” and its fundamental assumptions about the earliest transmission of Jesus tradition between the crucifixion and the Gospels' composition (590–615).

Those familiar with Bauckham's book will be well rewarded by the follow-up in these new chapters. For those unfamiliar, a brief overview of its argument and significance will suffice. Bauckham surveys biblical and other early data and argues against the common assumption of form-critical analysis that the Jesus “oral tradition” should be conceived on the model of fairy tales and folklore, wherein communities received and expanded or reshaped the stories in the process of transmission by numerous tradents and over several generations, such that the material in the canonical Gospels is necessarily quite far from any desire or access to eyewitness testimony. (Think of the schoolyard game “telephone.”) Bauckham retains consensus positions about the dates of the Gospels, but argues that “the period between the

'historical' Jesus and the Gospels was actually spanned, not by anonymous community transmission, but by the continuing presence and testimony of the eyewitnesses, who remained the authoritative sources of their traditions until their deaths" (8). Through a careful reading of the NT and early sources, he shows four Gospels tied intentionally and closely to the living memory of Jesus's companions. The folktale model not only requires far more than the thirty to fifty years between the crucifixion and the Gospels to be plausible, but the kind of "oral tradition" most consistent with the Gospel traditions is that of "controlled" transmission kept and guarded for accuracy not by autonomous "communities" but by individuals who personally preserved access to the testimony and guarded its content (esp. 252–263), as is confirmed in remarks from early NT epistles and elsewhere. Moreover, Bauckham argues, the Gospels themselves preserve indications of eyewitness testimony and bear literary markers paralleled in other ancient histories that associate their works with certain eyewitness persons and which prove consistent with early comments (esp. Papias, whose credibility Bauckham emphasizes) that corroborate, for example, Mark being formed from Peter's testimony and John being penned by an eyewitness.

The book is a trove of historical information and curiosities. Features like named characters are factored into the historical framework, in some cases with great explanatory power. (E.g., borrowing from Theissen, the notion of

"protective anonymity" can explain why some Gospels name certain individuals or include certain stories while others do not: 183–201.) But its overarching contributions are the most significant. Positively, Bauckham's work suggests that the Gospels be read as "testimony"—not precisely as historiography, with all the baggage attached to that term—but as a testimony proffered by and from eyewitnesses that principally "asks to be trusted" (5). The Gospels were written not by disinterested or uninvolved individuals, but this is no reason to reject their claims. Rather, it should make them historically and theologically valued for understanding the real Jesus, just as understanding other events in recent memory is most aided by hearing

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses

The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony

SECOND EDITION



RICHARD BAUCKHAM

from those who were there (cf. 472–508, where Bauckham compares the value of interested, involved, eyewitness testimony in modern historiography). Negatively, his book helpfully discredits the *a priori* doubt many have cast on the reliability of Gospels transmission. Pastors engaged in apologetics will be particularly helped by this, as the form-critical assumption of the “telephone” game still crops up in many popular-level books that undermine faith in the Gospels’ testimony to the person (and self-understanding) of Jesus that parishioners may pick up.¹ Bauckham’s book is not short, and requires patient

attention. But readers will be repaid both by the overarching conclusions and contributions of the book as well as the page-by-page experience of thinking historically about the Gospels with Bauckham. For anyone interested in the Gospels, in Jesus, or the connection between the two, it should be high on the reading list.

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1 E.g., Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperOne, 2014).

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“And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me!’” (Isaiah 6:8 ESV).



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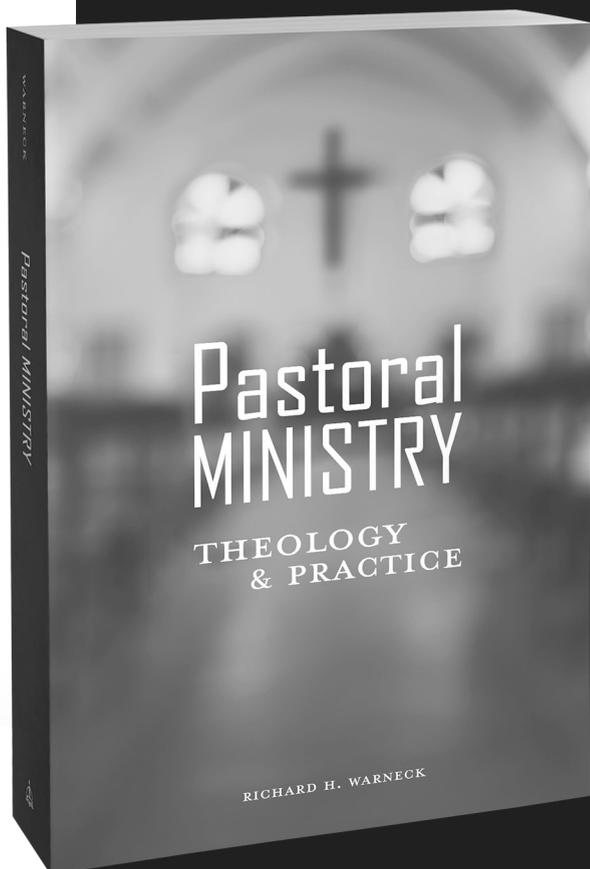
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