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On the cover: “Manna 427” by Sarah Bernhardt was part of an exhibition of her work featured at Concordia Seminary’s 2019 Theological Symposium (Sept. 17-18). A St. Louis artist working in a variety of media, she is also the executive director of the Intersect Arts Center (www.intersectstl.org). For more information about Sarah Bernhardt’s artwork, visit www.sarahbernhardtart.com.

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Editorials

Editor's Note

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life . . .” The old man, weathered by a lifetime in the wilderness and the burning fire of God, stands before the people of God at the foot of Mount Nebo. At the edge of a promised land he himself will not enter, he sets before them this one question (Dt 30:19).

Life or Death. I am convinced we could write a whole system of theological ethics based on this one question. It is, in a sense, Moses's categorical imperative. Is what I am about to do life-giving or death-dealing? Will this action or speech or article or policy or initiative contribute to the flourishing of life or its destruction?

The question is simple, but its outcome is never as straightforward as it first seems. All the laws of (un)intended consequences intrude. What appears to give life can, over time, deal death in ways that sometimes we could never have imagined, but at other times we should have anticipated. This is part of the “fear and trembling” at the heart of the Christian life.

All of which increases our astonishment at the fact that every single word and deed in the life and ministry of Jesus multiplied the flourishing of all the lives around him, until God turned his own death into the most flourishing life of all.

But I think Moses's question also provides an interesting backdrop to the three otherwise unrelated articles in this issue. Tim Saleska's articulation of a “gospel-centered” Christianity toes the thin line between the Scylla and Charybdis of both “gospelism” and “biblicism” so that we can find the true freedom that neither diminishes the biblical record nor pigeonholes the gospel word that is its reason for being. Jeff Gibbs offers up a life ethic that forces us to think through a *theological* basis for advocacy and activism that goes well beyond the political stance we take on abortion. And Josh Hollmann utilizes the vast thought of Charles Taylor to present a more robust and nuanced posture toward culture and society than those “options” that would rather duck and dodge the tension and messiness of life within community.

Editor's note

Reflections to mark the untimely death of Kou Seying, the Lutheran Foundation Professor of Urban and Cross-Cultural Ministry, will appear in the Spring 2020 issue of the Concordia Journal.

After all, isn't that what it means to *choose life*? To thrive in the tension and paradox of life as it is given us, resisting the temptation to trite nostalgias or empty optimisms?

The surprise of this life is that the more time we spend there, entering into the lives of others for the sake of finding a more abundant life together, the more thrilling it all becomes.

Travis J. Scholl
Managing Editor of Theological Publications

Preach Politics?

It is wise to worry about the political consequences of what Matthew Arnold called “the melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of faith leaving the culture, and leaving it susceptible to feverish quests for redemption through political action.¹

Conservative Lutheran pastors shy away from preaching on politics, rightly so. While we do take public positions on certain political issues, preeminently life issues, our general reticence to speak about issues in the left-hand kingdom can leave parishioners with little or no biblical reference to guide their political judgments and voting. Since the media and intellectual centers of American life have led our culture away from our historic Judeo-Christian moorings, shedding biblical light on issues underlying political debates can help church members form their personal opinions about left-hand issues and, most important, help grow them in discipleship.² We know truth better when we consider antitheses. *The Conservative Sensibility* by George Will can help us in our pastoral goal, to make our public preaching and teaching of God’s law more insightful.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed . . .

Will’s book rests upon these clear words from the second paragraph of the Declaration, the Founders’ firm belief that certain rights precede government because they were given by the Creator. The role of government is to “secure” rights given us by the Creator, not to create and dispense those rights as government might choose. The rights preceding government include but are not limited to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”³ The Declaration says “Life” is given by the Creator, but today abortion advocates make life a right the government can give or withhold. “Liberty” is also a right given by the Creator. While our Lutheran theology of freedom is more profound than the Declaration’s temporal understanding, we do identify with the Declaration’s attribution of freedom to God and not government. Citing Charles Edward Merriam, Will describes a change from the Founders’ thinking. Progressives

“formulated ‘a new idea of liberty, widely different from that’ of the Founders. The crux of the difference was that rights ‘have their source not in nature, but in law,’ and that laws creating rights do not take their bearings from nature.”⁴ And about “happiness,” James Madison “and his fellow Founders conceived of happiness as Aristotle did, as a steady, durable state of worthy satisfaction with life. . . . Happiness, which is not mere pleasure, is found in man’s natural function, which is this *activity* on his own behalf.”⁵ Doesn’t this fit nicely with our First Article affirmation of creatureliness? So the Declaration of Independence spells out America’s “single defining goal of equal political liberty” and “the Constitution follows logically from the Declaration.”⁶

If “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are not understood today as they were by the Founders, the situation is grievously worse with the Constitution. “The nation’s constitutional architecture has become ramshackle, incoherent, and incapable of protecting representative government, the rule of law, and liberty.”⁷ This *degradation*, a favorite of Will, is traced in his second chapter, “The Progressives’ Revision: An Emancipation (from Natural Rights) Proclamation.” One of the most revealing passages, at least for this reader, came when Mr. Will cited eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

If you wish to know precisely what the Founders and Framers did *not* intend, read Rousseau: “He who dares to undertake the making of a people’s institutions ought to feel himself capable, so to speak, of changing human nature, of transforming each individual . . . into part of a great whole from which he in a manner receives his life and being; of altering man’s constitution for the purpose of strengthening it. . . . He must, in a word, take away from man his own resources and give him instead new ones alien to him, and incapable of being made use of without the help of other men. . . .” There you have, with remarkable concision, the germ of the European radicalisms, of the left and the right, that would become twentieth-century totalitarianism. . . . The crux of modern radicalism is that human nature has no constancy . . . ⁸

The contrast to the mindset of the Founders is stark. “Politics originates in the constancy of human nature,” not in a government that can try to change human nature.⁹ The Framers’ bedrock belief in natural rights given to unchanging human nature was supplanted in the twentieth century by Progressives teaching that government dispenses rights as it chooses to improve human nature. Woodrow Wilson said in 1911, “If you want to understand the real Declaration of Independence, do not read the preface.” “Every Fourth of July should be a time for examining our standards, our purposes, for determining afresh what principles, what forms of power we think

most likely to effect our safety and happiness.”¹⁰ In other words, since the Declaration’s attribution of human rights to the Creator is antiquated, the Constitution needs new interpretations as times change. Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, “Government has a final responsibility for the well-being of its citizenship.” And Will comments, “Thus was the final responsibility for much of life removed from private life to the public sector—and to the banks of the Potomac. And thus was the ‘well-being’ of the citizen defined with reference to material conditions and without reference to the citizen’s character or responsibilities.”¹¹ What took root in the dire times of the Depression bloomed fully in the progressivism of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, “where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community.”¹² To no one’s surprise, Mr. Will does not approve. He quotes with approval Gene Healy’s description about where we are, “the state stepping in for Yahweh.”¹³

Preach politics? The title is misleading, by intention. Decades ago a pastor who took a position on a national question easily identified himself with a party, but the philosophic differences between the parties of the past are gone and also gone is “Christian” America. Since both parties today reflect the twentieth century’s departure from the vision of the Founders, you can apply the law to underlying issues in national life and news without taking a partisan position. So no, we’re not going to take political positions in our preaching and teaching but we should show our people how changed attitudes and practices in today’s culture challenge and subtly undermine basic Christian beliefs, especially the Ten Commandments. The liberalism dominating today’s culture is a piñata for our preaching of the law. Consider, for example, the deterioration in America’s work ethic. As you read on, refer what you read to the seventh commandment, which gives divine sanction to personal property, especially that of others, and the ninth and tenth commandments, which forbid envying what others have.

The degradation of American government is writ large in a semantic shift. The Declaration says government is instituted to “secure” rights that pre-exist government. But more and more of what government does consists of transferring wealth to members of groups that the government has decided are entitled to transfers. And the word “rights” is coming to be used interchangeable with “entitlements.”¹⁴

“In 1960 an average of 455,000 workers were receiving disability payments; in 2011, 8.6 million were.”¹⁵ Or grasp the dramatic change this way. In 1960, 134 Americans were working for one person who had claimed disability. By 2010 the ratio had become only 16 workers for each disabled person. This is integrally related to work force participation. “Since 1948, male labor force participation has plummeted

from 89 percent to 73 percent. Today, 27 percent of adult men do not consider themselves part of the workforce.¹⁶ Quoting economist Nicholas Eberstadt, it is now a “viable option” for “sturdy men,” who are neither working nor looking for work, to choose ‘to sit on the economic sideline, living off the toil or bounty of others.’”¹⁷

The nation’s mood is tinged with sadness stemming from well-founded fear that America’s new, post-Great Society government is subverting America’s old character. This government’s agenda is a menu of temptations intended to change the nation’s social norms by making Americans comfortable with dependency. And with the degradation of democracy by the practice of financing dependency by piling up public debt that forces unconsenting future generations to finance current consumption.¹⁸

What’s been done to the nation’s work ethic influences parents and children. The fourth commandment not only directs children to honor parents; it implies that we parents should be worthy of honor.¹⁹ As always throughout this massive book, 538 pages plus indices, Will’s documentation is extensive, and here are his succinct words about parents and children:

America’s poverty problem is not one of material scarcities but of abundant bad behavior. Data demonstrate that there are three simple behavioral rules for avoiding poverty: finish high school, produce no child before marrying or before age twenty. Only 8 percent of families who conform to all three rules are poor; 79 percent of those who do not conform are poor. And recent social learning includes this: The trajectory of a child’s life is largely determined in the earliest years. . . . And by far the best predictor of a child’s flourishing is the fervent devotion of two parents. Beyond the earliest years, the presence of two parents is also crucial to the success of primary and secondary education . . .²⁰

So no, don’t publically align yourself with a partisan position but surface biblical truths that shed light on national issues. Does abandoning biblical marriage bring consequences that harm individuals and society? Is a culture of dependency upon government compatible with biblical teaching? Are entitlements today at the expense of future generations proper? Can human nature be improved by government programs? Who gives us basic human rights? These and many, many more questions provide substance to biblical Lutheran apologetics today, again, a piñata for our preaching of the law.

The grandson of a Lutheran minister, Mr. Will says, “I grew up in a completely secular home where the subject of religion simply did not arise. I, like my father,

am an amiable, low-voltage atheist.”²¹ His chapter on religion, “Welcoming Whirl: Conservatism without Theism” is especially interesting to us. He contends you don’t have to believe in God to hold to the basic moral positions for the civic life created by the Founders. Still, he doesn’t minimize the role of Christianity in the formation of America. “Christianity was a source of three ideas central to the American founding. One is the idea of humanity’s irremediable imperfectability. The second is that original sin does not vitiate individual dignity. The third is that there are universal moral truths.”²² To the first, without preaching politics, you can contrast progressivism’s belief that human nature can be improved to the reality of our continuing sin and total need for grace. We continue to fall short of the glory of God, Romans 3:23. “The Founders’ philosophy began with accommodation of, not cures for, human defectiveness.”²³ To the second, that “original sin does not vitiate individual dignity,” isn’t that the second great command, to love your neighbor as yourself? (Mk 12:31). And to the third essential contribution to our founding, what are “universal moral truths” but the teaching that the law is a curb?

Christianity’s assessment of man, at once high and severe, is just about right for political philosophy: Man can be magnificent, but he is magnificent rarely, and never spontaneously—never without help from nurturing institutions. Luther had a haunting sense of humanity’s utter fallenness, and of humanity’s total dependence on God’s grace for even the slightest amelioration of the consequences of sin. This insulated Luther from the political temptation to believe in the perfectibility of man through the improvement of social arrangements.²⁴

Your congregation is one such nurturing institution, needed now more than ever. America’s increased dependency upon government coupled with today’s rampant individualism, man *incurvatus in se*, has weakened mediating institutions, the local organizations and clubs where, as *Cheers* put it, “Everyone knows your name and they’re always glad you came.” Your congregation is the body of Christ where people know they’re welcome and are nurtured in their individual lives for their vocations in our extremely individualistic and impersonal culture.

Religion has played a large role in nurturing the virtues that republican government presupposes, particularly micro self-government—the individual’s governance of his or her self. The nation assigns to politics and public policy the secondary and subsidiary role of encouraging, or at least not stunting, the infrastructure of institutions that have the primary responsibility for nurturing civic and other virtues. American religion therefore

coexists comfortably with, but is not itself a component of, American government.²⁵

To draw to a close, Mr. Will presents religion as a phenomenon, a presence in American history that is observable. What he does not do, nor is it his purpose, is apply academic theology and biblical faith to the deterioration of American culture and then describe true Christianity's hope for the future. This is our task. I don't know if you have the time or inclination to read Mr. Will's profound analysis but, at the least, what I've written here will, I hope, sharpen your law by putting it in the context of our public culture removed from its Judeo-Christian moorings, the law as "schoolmaster" to show our need for Jesus's gospel (Gal 3:24).

Dale A. Meyer
President

Endnotes

- 1 George F. Will, *The Conservative Sensibility* (New York: Hachette Books, 2019), 482–483.
- 2 About how the drift came, see James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 42.
- 3 That there are more rights than these three is clearly stated in the Ninth Amendment, "The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people."
- 4 Will, *The Conservative Sensibility*, 38.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 231.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 25, 26.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 56–57.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 70.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 109.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 329–330.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 329.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 331.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 328.
- 19 On parents meriting honor, see Martin Chemnitz on the Fourth Commandment in *Loci Theologici*, in the Preus translation, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 726f.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 314–315.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 478–479.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 495.
- 23 Will cites Harvey C. Mansfield, "It is true that they distrusted democracy, but not because they loved aristocracy. They distrusted democracy for the same reason they rejected aristocracy—because they distrusted human nature."
- 24 *Ibid.*, 474.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 473–474.

My Friend and Colleague, Victor Raj

If you Google Victor Raj, you can find out a lot of the facts about his education and his professional and academic service. You can learn that he earned his bachelor's degree at Kerala University in Thiruvananthapuram, and his master's degree at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College in Chennai (both in India). From Google you can also find out that he studied here at Concordia Seminary, earning both his STM and his ThD degrees here. He was a pastor in the India Evangelical Lutheran Church, and for a time president of the IELC's seminary in Nagercoil. He came to our faculty in 1995 with significant cross-cultural experience, having served as professor and then chairman of the theology department at Concordia University Wisconsin.

Here at Concordia Seminary, Victor has served as our Mission Professor of Exegetical Theology, and is the first to be named the Buehner-Duesenberg Professor of Missions in exegetical theology. He has also been the assistant director of the Institute for Mission Studies, besides serving as editor of *Lutheran Mission Matters*, the journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology. All of that you can find on Google, but let me tell you a couple of things you won't discover on the "interwebs."

As one of our four "mission professors" in the various departments, Victor brought his international experience, global vision, and cross-cultural insight to all aspects of our seminary life. In the classroom, working with his department colleagues, and in our collaborative work as a faculty, Victor has helped us come to a deeper understanding of God's mission and our privilege to participate in it. When we are tempted to ghettoize "missions" as a discreet sub-discipline or perhaps a special interest hobby for a few, Victor has helped *re-infect* our community and our curriculum with the missionary heart of God. Victor not only understands and teaches, but also embodies, the generous openness to other peoples and cultures that marks the genuine catholicity of the Christian church. Mission in the twenty-first century has been described as "from everywhere, to everywhere." Professor Victor Raj is evidence of that.

About the time Victor and Anie were moving to CSL, my family and I were leaving missionary service in Botswana. It was a time of big transitions for both of our families! My children, though born in the USA, had grown up in Africa, and they were understandably anxious. My youngest daughter summed it up by pointing out what seemed to her to be my disastrous professional mistake. "Here in Botswana, Dad, you're a *missionary*"—and you could see from her face that that was about the

best thing a person could be—“but in America, you’ll be *nothing*.” She was right, in a way, of course, and for a time I was less than nothing: I was a graduate student. But Dr. Raj was my reassuring example and living proof that a person did not have to quit being a missionary to be a professor.

And finally, about this word “retirement”: in the immortal words of Inigo Montoya, “*You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.*” We all wish you a long and happy retirement, but if you are imagining long stretches of idleness, then perhaps you should adjust your expectations. In fact, we have already booked you to teach for a term at the Matongo Lutheran Theological College in western Kenya. May this new phase bring with it further fruitful times for teaching, writing, and encouraging us all in God’s global mission.

William Schumacher

Christus et Victor

Relationships with colleagues vary dramatically in keeping with the varying personalities among us and in keeping with the sorts of harmonies of mind or heart that draw those personalities together. Some of those relationships remind me of trying to share the view through a microscope with a fellow investigator of the sometimes microscopic world of biblical scholarship. With others, I feel more like a member of a book club: we read the same books, usually over and over again, and share our discoveries in conversations that last for years, decades, careers, lifetimes. The image that comes to mind when I recall the pleasures of working side-by-side with Dr. Victor Raj, however, is of two men standing together on a rise and looking out over a vast panorama, a horizon limited only by the height of the rise and the fact that we cannot turn our heads much more than 180 degrees. It would likely have been much easier to know what to say this morning if we had shared only that view through the microscope.

I have been to India. My interests in the history of early Christianity, my fascination with accounts of the lives of the apostles, and seeing with my own eyes evidence of a very early presence of Christianity in India all led me to toy briefly with the theme of Saint Thomas and Saint Victor, their shared love and devotion to the same Lord, their lives of travel and the resulting ability to make any place a home and every place an opportunity for ministry along the journey. Victor and I have had some very enjoyable conversations together about Thomas, the likelihood of his actually doing mission work in India, and the rich and ancient Christian heritage of India. But, in the end, that was not what stood out to me about my years with Victor.

You might have guessed that among the apostolic band there was a more obvious choice than Thomas. Dr. Raj has even taught many of you his letters—yes, Saint Paul, Apostle to the Nations. And here is Saint Victor, Apostle to the Nations from the Nations. Much more so than Thomas, Paul has provided the stuff of conversation and reflection: old perspectives, new perspectives, Asian perspectives, Lutheran perspectives, you name it in one way or another over the years the man from Tarsus has brought us together and led us forward. The missionary's missionary! We even planned a College of Fellows gathering to talk about Paul, philosopher, poet, and witness on Mars Hill—and I still wish it could have actually happened. But, in the end, that was not what stood out to me about my years with Victor, either.

What stands out to me about Victor is not his relationship to either of these beloved servants, it is rather fellow servant Victor's relationship to their Lord and his.

It is not Thomas and Victor, not Paul and Victor, but *Christus et Victor* that must be our theme this morning.

Victor is himself, of course, a work of the victorious Christ, proof of the power of the gospel, one of that vast number drawn to the uplifted Lord Jesus. But Victor has also been for us here in this place a picture of that Christ. His quiet humbleness, his willingness to serve, his winsome good humor, all these make one feel as he walks away from Victor that he has been dealing with a person in whom dwells the Spirit of Christ. It was not just Victor that I was discussing that text with, it was *Christus et Victor*. It was not just Victor that I wept with over the Jerusalems of today that refuse to be gathered together within the Lord's embrace, it was *Christus et Victor*. It was not just Victor that I spoke with, dreamed with, prayed with, walked with, it was *Christus et Victor*. And through Victor, I have come to know my Christ better, especially as friend and brother.

There are few passages that I find harder to comprehend than the words of our Lord in John 16:7—"It is better for you that I go away." *You* are not allowed to use those words, Victor. Even though it may be better for you, better even for parts of the church around the world, we here today cannot imagine how your departure could confer a benefit upon us. Nevertheless, we do hope and pray, Victor, that the Spirit of Christ who made himself so manifest in your work among us will remain among us, our Helper and Comforter, once you have retired from our midst. On behalf of the whole exegetical department, I thank you, Victor, for all that you have done among us and all that you have been among us. And, as God has richly blessed us through you, so may he now bless and keep you and Anie and your whole family as you continue your service to him in new ways and in different places.

உங்களாக்குச் சமாதானம் என்றார்.
Unkaḷukkuc camātānam enṛār.

[This should have been not Tamil, the language of the IELC, but Malayalam, the language of Victor's state:]

നിങ്ങളുടെ സമാധാനം എന്ന്.
Niñṅaḷkku samādhānam ennu.

Jeffrey Oschwald

He Was a Gift

Norman Nagel (1925–2019)

Norman Nagel began to influence me through his writing when I was a graduate student fifty years ago. Two days before his death his essay on Luther's use of the medieval motif of Christ as *sacramentum et exemplum* went into another of my footnotes. In between lay years of friendship and an exchange of insights and perspectives of which I was by far the chief beneficiary. Norman and I did not always agree precisely—a student once marveled to me that he could hardly believe that he saw the two of us walking across the quad laughing with each other—but it was precisely because we enjoyed the give-and-take that our sharing a vast common reservoir of understanding of God and what it means to be human had such rich benefits for me. That reservoir for both of us stemmed from our common commitment to and borrowing from Martin Luther and my teacher Hermann Sasse—I never quite shared Norman's keenness for the perspectives of Werner Elert, but we both took much from C. F. W. Walther's discernment of how the proper distinction of law and gospel is to function.

Norman knew better than to think that when you have said "Jesus," you have said it all. But he also knew that when you have said "Jesus," and done so in the shadow of the cross and the breeze that blows from heaven through the empty tomb, you have said what the world so badly needs to hear. He knew that any recourse to human performance for establishing peace of mind or soul was vain. Only in the Savior on the cross can human beings find the ground that God has put under their feet. He relished and reveled in the ways in which God comes into our lives to converse with us and to deliver the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection in the concrete forms of human language, proclaimed, pronounced, whispered, joined with water or with bread-body and wine-blood.

Norman helped broaden my vision of Christ's church as well and of the Augustinian commitment, learned again from Sasse, to give witness to our faith to all in the household of faith (and beyond) who will listen, and to give that witness in the winsome manner that Saint Peter recommends.

Born in China of New Zealander and Australian roots, raised in Australia, educated in both the United States and England, conversant with Nordic and German versions of Lutheran theology, Norman directed our vision beyond our own narrow confines and conversation. He reached out to people with a naturalness that established a basis of trust immediately. A German colleague still tells of meeting Norman for the first time at the International Luther Congress at Luther Seminary

in Saint Paul in 1993. At an old-fashioned Midwestern ice cream social, Norman approached strangers and asked, “Do you have anything like an ice cream social in your country?” Conversation began and then ended up in talking about the reformer. Not just at Luther Congresses—when he heard of Norman’s death, Oswald Bayer, the emeritus professor of systematic theology at the University of Tübingen, commented, “I remember Norman Nagel with pleasure. His solid theological insight in our several conversations in Saint Louis was a delight.”

As important as Norman’s presence was and remains for North American Lutherans, his role in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England, particularly in establishing Westfield House as a Lutheran house of studies, has perhaps an even greater impact to this day—and not only for the people of the ELCE but also others in English churches and certainly for students from the United States and a number of other countries. In the UK Norman is remembered for his tireless efforts at establishing Westfield and for his clear witness to the gospel as Luther understood it in circles far beyond the ELCE. A few years ago on an airplane returning from Germany, I fell into conversation with an Anglican priest, who, upon hearing that I was at Concordia, instantly asked about Norman. They had studied together at Cambridge as Norman was working on his doctorate, and he admired still the energy and determination Norman invested in founding Westfield House. After many years he could recount fond memories of Norman as a valuable conversation partner and a true friend. Norman’s cordiality and openness as well as his high and disciplined scholarly standards continue the tone at Westfield today.

Norman’s students carry his concern for preaching Christ, for the faithful execution of their office as ministers of the word, and for the faithful use of that word in its oral, written, and sacramental forms across North America and to far corners of the world—Ethiopia, Australia, Norway, among other lands. His provocation to think in the Wittenberg way of proclaiming the Lord abides.

Students may sometimes have thought his lectures esoteric or exotic, but Norman was a down-to-earth man who loved the things of everyday life. It was he who from the faculty sat with the children of the campus to read nursery rhymes and chat about life in a new generation. His door was always open for students or colleagues to come and chat, and any topic was fair game.

We did not always understand where he was driving us, but he has given us much to continue to ponder even if he is with the Lord. He wanted us to think and not just thoughtlessly swallow, from our predecessors or our contemporaries. Theology was his profession and his passion, and it was for him too important to ever be an easy task. Norman Nagel was and remains a gift, given by God to our community in a critical time. His subtle provocations to think beyond our own limits in order to recognize, reclaim, and ride on the power of the gospel of Christ remain, thanks be to God.

Robert Kolb

Remembering Norman Nagel Jesus-y Nuggets, Ironic Intersections, Gospel-Saturated Gifts

“Faith doesn’t talk about itself; faith talks about Jesus.”

“A Spirit who talks about Himself isn’t the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is all on about Jesus.”

“Beware the aliquid in homine. Anything in you wobbles. What is certain and unwobbleable is what He says and does outside of you.”

So, how does one write an encomium (“a formal expression of high praise”) for someone who devoted his life to hammering epigrams like this into the (hard) heads and hearts of sinner-saints, students, seminarians, future pastors, teachers, and church leaders? Well, I guess you sin boldly—and then repent more boldly, since “The Gospel Is What Lutherans Care About.”

Valpo Days

“The Gospel Is What Lutherans Care About.” Just over nine years ago, on Reformation Day, I preached a sermon with that title in chapel at the LCMS International Center. Later, it was published as an article in the *Lutheran Witness*. In the sermon (and the article), I admitted that the pithy and catchy sermon theme did not originate with me. I had heard or read it years ago (in another sermon? journal article?) and it had stuck in my head like a mantra, despite my inability to remember the source.

Imagine my surprise and embarrassment when, soon afterwards, I received a letter from an LCMS pastor pointing me to an article by that same name written by none other than my former professor and STM advisor Norman Nagel (published in the September 1973 issue of *The Springfielder*).¹ Yikes! But then it struck me: how appropriate, in a sense, precisely *considering the source*. I’m not sure if Dr. Nagel ever read my little published sermon, but I imagine he would actually be delighted that I remembered those unwobbleable words even apart from the wobbly person who had written them.

When he wrote the article “The Gospel Is What Lutherans Care About” in 1973, Dr. Nagel was serving as Dean of the Chapel at Valparaiso University, where he mounted the pulpit regularly on Sundays and throughout the week during the years 1968–1983. Further irony: in my previous life as a pre-law student at (yes) Valparaiso University (1976–1978), before I had any intentions or aspirations towards serving in the office of the public ministry, I heard countless sermons by Dr. Nagel before I even really knew (or cared) who he was. In terms of pure style, of course, his preaching was utterly unique and unforgettable; but I was in a very different place in my life at that time, not much interested in theology, so (consciously and experientially speaking) I can’t vouch for how much of Dr. Nagel’s preaching really “stuck.” But, who knows? The Spirit blows where he wills through his unwobbleable word, and “the Holy Spirit is all on about Jesus,” always and everywhere. In retrospect, Dr. Nagel may well have played a critical (yet again, aptly “hidden”) role in my decision to change directions—and vocations—at this critical juncture in my life.

Next Crossroad: Seminary

Thus, as fate (= God) would have it, there was much more Nagel to come, and this time I was fully alert: pencil sharpened, eyes and ears attuned for didactic, Christ-centered drama, on the edge of my classroom seat like everyone else (you didn’t fall asleep in a Nagel class). “He gives you everything and then he gives you more.” Dr. Nagel liked to say that about Jesus, but it’s not a bad description of Dr. Nagel’s teaching style. More Jesus! More gospel! More gifts!

Dr. Nagel arrived at Concordia Seminary in 1983, my vicarage year, so my access to him as professor was limited to two years (including a year of graduate studies). But I gobbled up as many of his classes as I could, including Christology, the Lord’s Supper, and several courses on Luther’s theology.

Besides that utterly unique accent and those unforgettable facial expressions and strategically timed and placed bodily contortions (e.g., down on his hands and knees in a classroom corner, scratching a cross into the baseboard), most memorable about Dr. Nagel’s teaching were those epigrams, those “Nagel nuggets” that abound in thick classroom notes still preserved in my files. Pastor-friend and former IC Chaplain Will Weedon sent me (upon request, and apparently from memory) pages and pages of them that will bring memories flooding back for anyone who sat at Dr. Nagel’s feet. Here are just a few zingers:

“All the Christ, Christ, Christ stuff flies in the air unless it is Christ for you. And He is for you where he promises to be.”

“We are not roaming in the realm of ideas. He did it. That sheer He-did-it-ness for which we can lay on Him no compelling reasons,

and the data-ness, that recognition evacuates any possibility of us laying something down ahead of God.”

“Nothing could be less like God than the man hanging dead on the cross. . . . so opposite to every religious notion about God—religion being the result of our wishing, emotions, yearning, thinking.”

“For Augustine the top thing about God was his almighty power. And how does that hang on Calvary?”

“God is given you in the sarx [flesh], whose shins would bruise if you kicked them. To look for him anywhere outside the flesh is to look away from where he is for you.”

“Who is doing the verbs of salvation? Hands off the verbs! They are his.”

“Faith without Christ equals nothing. Faith is nothing but what is given to.”

“What Jesus loves is you, not what he ends up making of you. Does God think you’re worth bothering with? Look to Calvary!”

“The person scornful of the Lord’s Supper says: ‘I don’t need to be given to.’”

“Can’t say unJesusy things about the Holy Spirit. The more Jesusy the Spirit, the more we can be sure we’re getting it right!”

“The good news of Easter isn’t that a man rose from the dead, but that the man who had been crucified for our sin rose from the dead.”

I know what you’re thinking: More! More! More! And yet at the same time, Dr. Nagel’s teaching cannot (must not) be reduced to a series or collection of one-liners. Behind them was a wholistic theology centered in a whole Christ and a whole gospel, passionately articulated by a professor who demanded a whole lot of work from his students, mostly future pastors and preachers soon to be sent out to proclaim that vital, precious gospel to fellow sinner-saints.

One of the reasons you didn’t fall asleep in a Nagel class is because at the beginning of each class one student was chosen to march to the front of the room and deliver a substantive report and summary of the previous day’s lecture, to be evaluated by both students and professor. In that respect and others, Dr. Nagel could also be frightfully firm (no gospel without the law!). Slackers were wilted into repentance (nothing worse than a long, silent Nagel stare and frown), and sometimes that involved the whole class. Once, shortly after the beginning of a long, intensive

summer class, Dr. Nagel walked out in approbative silence, obviously frustrated by our lack of preparation. We were left squirming and wondering if there would be a silent, sudden return . . . for judgment or deliverance (most of us stayed until the end just in case!). Ultimately, however, there was always absolution (more! more! more!) . . . followed by more frantic note-taking.

STM Adventures

Space doesn't allow me to share *awesome* (in more than one sense of the term) memories of working with Dr. Nagel over a period of several years to complete my STM thesis on Exodus 24 and its connection to the New Testament accounts of the Lord's Supper. I was especially intrigued by the eschatological elements in all of those texts. The final thesis title reflects well Dr. Nagel's convictions and concerns about my (flighty?) obsession with things eschatological. "The Eschatology of the Lord's Supper" (my original title) became "The Lord's Supper's Eschatology" ("The latter is grounded in the former! First the Lord, then his Supper, then his end-times gifts and promises through the Supper!") and then "The Lord's Supper's Eschatology in the Blood of the Covenant" ("What is the proprium here? The blood! All and only through the blood!").

The thesis chapter headings in part 3 (where things are pulled together) will strike a familiar chord to Nagelites everywhere: "The Lord's Supper's Eschatology: Only Through the Blood"; "The Giftness of the Lord's Supper's Eschatology in the Blood of the Covenant"; "The Locatedness of the Lord's Supper's Eschatology in the Blood of the Covenant"; "The Wholeness of the Lord's Supper's Eschatology in the Blood of the Covenant." (Oh, and that "Covenant" business had to be carefully parsed early on, to make sure that it was running fully in the way of the Gospel, Gift, *Testament*.) The outline might be viewed by some as an overly slavish attempt to please and appease one's advisor. Well, surely there are worse forms of slavery!

Throughout my STM work, an epigram of Luther's constantly drummed into my head by Dr. Nagel (via Hermann Sasse) was: "This sacrament is the gospel." With the gospel, of course, it is always *all* and then *more*. I always knew I had done something right with my thesis draft when I found in the margin a near-ineligible, red-letter scrawl: "More! More!" Unfortunately, I took that affirmation literally time and again, until my STM thesis draft had swelled into a tome of nearly 400 pages—with prospects of future PhD work still looming, and time running out. I'll never forget the day when, with fear and trepidation, I walked into Dr. Nagel's office, laid the encyclopedic draft on his desk, and announced: "It is finished." There was an overly long, uncomfortable pause, and then, to my inexpressible relief, a broad smile and the gospel-ish proclamation: "Wonderful!!" The "eschatological" culmination of my STM journey with Dr. Nagel was one of those famed celebration receptions at his home amidst friends and mentors and colleagues, as only he and his dear wife Betsy could

host them, complete with those renowned cucumber sandwiches washed down with sherry, a “feast of rich food and well-aged wine” (Is 25:6). Oh joy!

The CTCR . . . and Beyond

Having been privileged to know and receive from Dr. Nagel as preacher, professor, and advisor, I received still more: the gift of working with him as a colleague on the CTCR. As fate (= God) would (again) have it, when I received the call to the CTCR executive staff in late 1990 (while serving as pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Hillsdale, Michigan), there was Dr. Nagel again, this time serving as a faculty-appointed member of the CTCR. Thus, our paths would cross again at this juncture, but only after (full disclosure!) the challenge of processing and prayerfully considering a letter from Dr. Nagel gently and fraternally advising me to consider seriously *not* accepting the call to the CTCR staff. Knowing Dr. Nagel as I did, I chose to take his urging as a compliment: what a gift to think that someone whom I respected as highly as Dr. Nagel might think that my gifts could perhaps better be used by God elsewhere (perhaps even someday on the seminary faculty?).

Soon after accepting the call to serve on the CTCR staff (where I have served now for almost 30 years—with no regrets!), I wrote to Dr. Nagel to explain as best I could my reasons for doing so. I saved, and have in front of me on my desk as I write, the gracious hand-written letter I received in response, assuring me that, “as [you] recognized, nought *ad hominem*,” rather, the heart of the matter was “the seminary [unlike the International Center] being put on a frozen budget and the burdening of seminarians with funding the seminary where we have the greater need of strengthening our theological resources.” I understood completely, of course; his heart was exactly where it needed to be and should have been. I was moved and touched by his honesty and his passion for and loyalty to the seminary and its vital role in the life of the church. Most touching was the final paragraph of his letter, where, after assuring me that he was looking forward to our work together on the CTCR, he added: “With hearty greetings also to Hope [my wife], who greeted me with such charming and overwhelming modesty.” This too was vintage Norman Nagel: gracious and courteous to the core, with a deep understanding of and appreciation for precious gifts like spouse and family. I have been told by those who would know that this feared, revered, beloved, brilliant theologian loved and treasured nothing more than being down on the living room floor laughing and playing with his own children and grandchildren (as they screamed: More! More! More!).

Writing this encomium has caused me to ponder the many and countless ways that Dr. Nagel’s insights have permeated my preaching, teaching, parenting, serving, leading, living—and that of the hundreds and thousands of others who have been impacted for time and eternity by his teaching, writing, presenting, preaching, living, and giving. How can something like that be calculated or measured? Fortunately, it

can't: we'll never know (at least on this side of heaven) and don't need to know. It's all a gift, and if we knew too much about such things we would undoubtedly try to mark it all down and measure it and add it up in an effort to "give credit where credit is due." As anyone who knew Dr. Nagel knows, any sort of "measuring" was absolutely taboo in his "pure gift" theology: "The Gospel cannot be fractioned. It is always the whole lot." As far as giving credit where credit is due: "Faith doesn't talk about itself; faith talks about Jesus." And, even our good works, according to Dr. Nagel, "are only good works because they're forgiven." Dr. Nagel was a gift, and (like all of us) he was a forgiven, beloved child of God. I trust that he would fully and graciously forgive me for having inadvertently said of him here anything more than that.

The Christian life is shaped by the giving love of Christ and in the Scripture we have his bidding and descriptions of that shape. We would please him. Yet in nothing of our achievements, in no factor of us, do we place our final reliance. That is in his body and blood given and shed for us, in our Baptism, and in his forgiving and life-giving word of the Gospel, which does not merely tell but bestows what it says. This is all from him and as sure as he is sure . . . The most incredible thing is that God should love us, and love us so much as to go through Calvary for us. Here is a love beyond the limits of our understanding. We cannot explain it. It derives solely from the heart of God before time and beyond time. From the cross I know God thus loves me.²

Joel Lehenbauer

Endnotes

- 1 It's a very brief article; I encourage you to track it down and read it, keeping in mind when it was written and published, and the whole churchly context at the time. It's vintage Nagel, and will serve as a much more fitting encomium than what you are reading here.
- 2 Norman E. Nagel, "The Gospel Is What Lutherans Care About," *The Springfielder* 37, no. 2 (September 1973): 119–120.

Articles

The Gospel-Centered Christian

Timothy E. Saleska



Timothy E. Saleska is professor of exegetical theology and dean of Ministerial Formation at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. His areas of interest and expertise include Hebrew and the history of

exegesis. He is particularly interested in the book of Psalms, namely how Christians read and meditate on them, and the history of their interpretation in the church. He also has an interest in examining how Christians interpret the Bible in general and how pastors can form faithful readers of God's word and remain faithful themselves.

Most Christians would agree that the gospel, the good news about Jesus, is the saving message in the Bible. But if we were to look at how our acceptance of this truth actually influences the way we interpret the Scriptures, or the way we preach and witness, or the way we deal with cultural issues and people outside of the faith, we would soon see our agreement fading.

So, while everyone might agree about the importance of the gospel as the saving message of the Bible, not everyone agrees with how this belief should be embodied in the various practices of our faith. This raises a lot of questions. For my purposes here, two of them are important, “How do Lutherans understand the relationship between the gospel and Scripture?” and, “How does our understanding influence our preaching and teaching and our lives together?” These are big questions, and in this paper, I can only start to address them. Though there are any number of

Editor's note

The author would like to thank his colleagues, and especially Dr. Peter Nafzger, for reading earlier versions of this paper, and for the many helpful suggestions for improvement that they made. It first appeared as a Concordia Pages booklet available for free download at www.concordiatheology.org

directions that my argument could take, I am going to argue specifically that Lutherans have always and should continue to walk a middle road between two ditches into which it is easy to fall. The middle-of-the-road approach for which I am advocating is what I will call a “gospel-centered approach.” The ditches to be avoided are a so-called gospel-reductionist approach on the one side and a so-called biblicist approach on the other.

I have three reasons for shaping my argument this way, depending on which ditch

Gospel reductionists collapsed the distinction between the formal and material principles of theology so that the authority of the Scriptures was reduced to its gospel content alone.

I am concerned about: (1) The term *gospel reductionism* was more commonly heard in the LCMS in the 1960s and ‘70s than it is today. Nevertheless, lately I have observed that the term is again being used to label someone’s teaching in a negative way. But how is it being used? Is the label appropriately applied or is a gospel-reductionist approach being confused with a gospel-centered approach? I hope to enhance our communication with each other so that the gospel-reductionist label is not applied hastily or inappropriately.

(2) The term *biblicism* may be equally unfamiliar. However, even though this approach is usually associated with fundamentalist or conservative evangelicalism, because of cultural pressures, Lutherans may be especially susceptible to it today. What does it mean and why is it unhelpful? (3) Finally, I also hope that readers will be able to appreciate anew the beautiful Lutheran practice of a gospel-centered approach and applaud those whose life and teaching avoid these two ditches and take the gospel-centered road.

Gospel Reductionism or Gospelism¹

Though there are various ways that both the gospel and the Scriptures can be reduced, the term *gospel reductionism* was a label that arose in the LCMS in the 1960s and ‘70s to describe certain beliefs about the relationship between the gospel and the Scriptures that were judged by the church to be teachings that “cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended.”²

Gospel reductionists in the 1960s and ‘70s apparently operated with the assumption that the gospel, not the Scriptures, was the norm for all theology.³ Another way to say this is that gospel reductionists collapsed the distinction between the formal and material principles of theology so that the authority of the Scriptures was reduced to its gospel content alone.⁴ The collapse of these two principles had practical implications for theology and ministry.

For one thing, it justified the claim that *as long as the gospel is not distorted*, it is permissible to reject the historicity of events recorded in the Scriptures. For example, it made it possible to say that it is not necessary to believe that God created the world, that he sent the Flood, that he led Israel out of Egypt, that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he performed the miracles the Gospels record and so on, because the gospel can be faithfully proclaimed regardless of whether or not there is a real historical event lying behind these Scriptural accounts.

This practice is reductive in two ways. First, by assuming that the gospel can be abstracted from the historical and scriptural context that gives it meaning, the incomparable richness of the gospel message is reduced to a formula like one might read on a billboard or hear in a 30-second TV commercial. Second, the authority of the Scriptures, as the norm *for* the gospel, is reduced. One interpretive result of the gospel-reductionist approach is that although the reality behind the account of Jesus's death and resurrection must be maintained, Scripture does not necessarily provide many other historical accounts of God actually acting in this world—great acts of judgment and salvation which might help us understand more fully the wonder of what God did for us when he sent his Son or why he even acted in this way. A gospel-reductionist approach reduces the content of necessary Christian belief to a minimum and discards whatever does not seem to serve the gospel directly.⁵

Also, when the gospel instead of the Scriptures becomes the norm for all theology, the authority of Scripture to serve as the church's sole standard of doctrine and life (its *normative authority*) becomes limited to (or confused with) the efficacy of the gospel to bring people to faith in Jesus (its *causative authority*). The confusion enabled the claim that the gospel, rather than the entire Scriptures, should be the norm for determining the appropriate content and relevance for us of any particular doctrine or teaching. Again, the reduction conflates the normative authority of Scripture (the formal principle of theology) with the causative authority of the gospel (the material principle of theology).

Contrary to this, Lutherans teach that the entire body of doctrine is always judged, ruled, and guided by the Scriptures. Lutheran doctrine is supported with scriptural testimony, and so we regard its truth as unchanging. To proceed otherwise would mean that various doctrinal teachings in the Scriptures could be developed or set aside depending on historical circumstances, as long as the gospel is not distorted. It might also mean that rather than looking first and foremost at what the Scriptures teach about a particular problem or question and discussing the issue on the basis of the Scriptures, other human sources of knowledge or tradition are given priority in the discussion. As a result, the authority of the Scriptures to govern the teaching and practice of the church is reduced.

One example that seems to have been in play in the 1960s and '70s regards the teaching of the law. A gospel-reductionist approach could suggest that what God's

If gospelism reduces the normative authority of the Scriptures in relation to the gospel, biblicism reduces the causative authority of the gospel in relation to the Scriptures.

law declares to be sinful, need not be considered as sinful at all times and in all contexts. It just depends. It could also suggest that Christians no longer need the law to know God's will for their lives. The gospel becomes, in effect, a new law. This reduction confuses the law and gospel and their appropriate functions in our lives.

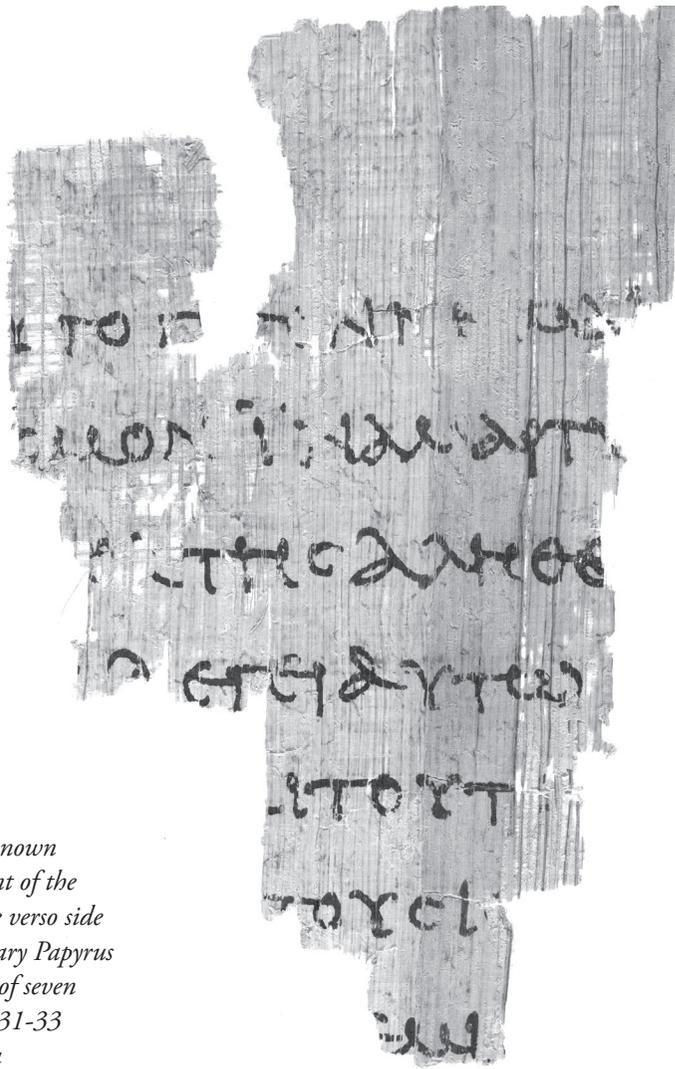
Biblicism

Biblicism is an approach to the Scriptures that is usually associated with Fundamentalist branches of Christianity. The term *Fundamentalist* goes back to at least 1909 and refers to individuals and organizations of evangelical Christians who fought to defend traditional Christianity against modernist positions such as Darwinism and historical criticism. As part of their defensive strategy, Fundamentalists advocated that Christians unite behind what they called “the fundamentals” of their faith. J. I. Packer, for example, lists five items as fundamental to the faith and to evangelical Christianity: the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture, the deity of Christ, Jesus's virgin birth and miracles, his penal death for our sins, and his physical resurrection and personal return.⁶

Thus, while the gospelism that I described above is an approach to the Scriptures associated with the liberal side of Christianity, biblicism is an approach to the Scriptures associated with the conservative side. It may be for this reason that LCMS Lutherans can be more susceptible to biblicism and its approach to Scripture than to gospelism and its approach.

Though there is not total agreement on how biblicism should be defined, most scholars point to a core of interpretive practices that they identify as biblicism.⁷ Not all of them are relevant for the purposes of this paper, and so I am going to focus on those practices that are reductive in a way that is a mirror image of the gospelism described above. That is, if gospelism reduces the normative authority of the Scriptures in relation to the gospel, biblicism reduces the causative authority of the gospel in relation to the Scriptures.

For example, as can be seen in the list of the five fundamentals of the faith described above, Biblicists show a tendency to move the Doctrine of Inspiration and Inerrancy to a central—if *not* the central— place in Christian theology.⁸ The danger is that if the Doctrine of Inspiration and Inerrancy becomes foundational for the Christian faith, it becomes easy to think that our faith *depends* on an infallible Bible.⁹ And it becomes easy to think that for the sake of our faith we need to prove that there



Perhaps the oldest known manuscript fragment of the New Testament, the verso side of the Rylands Library Papyrus P52 contains parts of seven lines from John 18:31-33 (Credit: Wikimedia Commons / RylandsImaging).

are no errors or contradictions in Scripture. But how does one prove that the Bible is trustworthy in all that it says? The only way we humans know how to do that is by providing logical arguments based on the best scientific, archeological, or historical evidence that solve the problems and ease the contradictions that skeptics raise.

However, when we over-engage in this kind of proving-the-Bible activity

(especially with those who are outside of the Christian faith), we actually give human ways of knowing and judging truth authority over Scripture. In other words, we start to rely on imperfect human knowledge to help us determine the truthfulness of the divine Scriptures.¹⁰

Another result of moving Inspiration and Inerrancy to the foundations of our faith is that, consciously or not, we can make this doctrine the starting point for our theological conversations with non-Christians. Christian Smith says that beginning with a doctrine of inspiration is a common move in mainstream evangelical theology, especially in certain currents of it.¹¹ This practice suggests that we should first show people that the Bible can be trusted in what it says, so that they will then be able to

Faith is a gift of God, not something a person can be reasoned into.

accept the saving message of Jesus. But this move overlooks the truth that it is through the proclamation of Jesus, the proclamation of the gospel, that the Holy Spirit works faith. Faith is a gift of God, not something a person can be reasoned into. (See more on this below.)

At this point, it can be seen that there are a number of dangers we expose ourselves to when we place an over-emphasis on the Doctrine of Inspiration and Inerrancy in our theology: (1) It gives too much responsibility to human ways of reasoning and less to the miracle of faith worked by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. That is, it reduces the causative authority of the gospel. (2) It may also lead someone to believe that if there is something in the Bible that can't be proved or a contradiction that can't be satisfactorily reconciled, their faith will crumble. Practically speaking, they have put their faith in the Scriptures, per se, rather than in the promise of Jesus. Again, in such a case, the authority of the gospel is reduced. (3) By over-emphasizing the Doctrine of Inspiration and Inerrancy, it is easy to lose sight of the purpose of the Scriptures, which is to make people wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus. That is, we can focus too much on what the Scriptures *are* rather than what they *do* (Rom 1:16–17; Jn 5:39; Jn 20:31).

Therefore, it is important for Christians to remember that proclaiming the Word made flesh is more important than *defending* the scientific accuracy of the written word of God (the Scriptures). And faith in the Word made flesh is more important than reason and logical consistency.¹² Uuraas Saarnivaara says that for Luther and his time in general, the question of whether or not the Bible was errorless in every word was not a problem. They simply believed that the Scriptures are from God and therefore the God-given norm of faith and life. He quotes Luther, “When discrepancies occur in the Holy Scriptures, and we cannot harmonize them, let it pass; it does not endanger the article of the Christian faith.”¹³

Two other tendencies of a fundamentalist approach to the Bible are to assume: (1) that every book of the Bible is as central to our faith and life as every other book, and (2) that no doctrinal teaching in the Scriptures is more central or more important than any other. In other words, a person with this perspective can slide into reading the Bible as a flat and centerless book.¹⁴

Again, this assumption reduces the authority of the gospel, which is the central teaching of the Scriptures and the reason God gave them to us (i.e., the gospel as the material principle of Scripture). Though more will be said about this below, suffice it to say for now that the gospel, the main theme of the Scriptures, should always condition our reading of the various books and texts of which the Scriptures are comprised. If it does not, our understanding of how the Scriptures should be read and applied will drastically change, law and gospel will get confused, and our understanding of redemption and salvation will be distorted.¹⁵

One final observation about a Biblicist perspective is that it has too narrow of an understanding of what God's word is. The narrow view sees the written Scriptures as the only or the most important form of God's word.¹⁶ It does not see that God's word comes in different forms. But the Scriptures themselves testify that the true God, unlike idols, speaks in various, interconnected ways to his human creatures.¹⁷ In both the OT and the NT, for example, he attaches his word of promise to *visible signs* so that his people could continually hear his word of forgiveness and salvation and not forget what kind of a God he is.¹⁸ In the OT, he spoke his word of judgment and salvation through the ordinary human language of his *prophets*, and in the NT God spoke through his *apostles*, who in turn promise us that God still speaks to us through the preaching and even personal sharing of his word.¹⁹

Of course, at the center of these different forms of God's speech is God's ultimate speech act, performed through the gift of his Son, the Word made flesh (Jn 1:1–14). “In many and various ways, God spoke to our fathers through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Heb 1:1).” All of God's conversations revolve around this Word from God, and so it is this personal Word from God that holds Christians together and gives a particular shape to our lives together. The main reason that we delight to read and study the Scriptures, and gather to hear them preached, and endeavor to order our lives around them is because they tell us about the One who promises us eternal life. He is the one we look to as our authority because all authority has been given to him (1 Cor 15). He is the only one who has power over death and life.

However, because of this emphasis on the Bible as God's only or most important word, Biblicists can sometimes claim too much for the Bible. For example, the statement by J. I. Packer that, “To learn the mind of God, one must consult his written Word,” misses the scriptural point that it is only Jesus who makes his Father known (Jn 1:18). Without him, we dwell in darkness. And Paul invites Christians to have the

mind of Christ, not to inquire into the mind of God, whose ways and judgments are unsearchable and inscrutable. “Who has known the mind of God?” the prophet asks (Phil 2:5; Rom 11:33–35).²⁰

John Frame gives another example of how Biblicists claim too much for the Bible when he points out that biblicism often tends to treat the Scriptures as a “textbook” of science, philosophy, politics, economics, and so on.²¹ Christian Smith calls this “the Handbook Model” according to which the Bible is treated as a compendium of teachings on an array of subjects such as science, economics, health, politics, and romance. He lists the titles of Christian books written according to this model of treating Scripture.²²

But by reading the Scriptures this way, their main purpose is lost. Again, the Scriptures were given to us for the sake of the gospel, the power of God for salvation. As Jesus himself says, the Holy Spirit’s work is to bring us to Jesus (Jn 16:12–15), and we pray that he will do that through our reading and studying of the Scriptures. We grow to trust the Scriptures and believe them to be inspired by God because we have come to love the Jesus to whom the Scriptures testify. And we trust the Scriptures as God’s word even without “proof” of their accuracy. The Scriptures are precious to us because in them we learn about the riches of salvation that God has given us in his Son.²³

The Gospel-Centered Christian

As I have begun to show, gospel-centered Christians use different assumptions in their scriptural teaching and practice. The distinctions are important because Lutherans want all of their pastors and teachers, and indeed the whole community of Christians, to be gospel-centered people. Failure to be gospel-centered will lead to the reductions that I have described above. What follows is a description of the most important characteristics of a gospel-centered Christian.

For one thing, gospel-centered Christians read the Scriptures “in the light of Christ.” That is to say, their interpretation of the entire Bible is shaped by their conviction that Scripture’s central truth is the message that Jesus, the Son of God, is the fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel that he would redeem them from sin and every evil. It is for his sake that God graciously forgives all of our sins and delivers us from eternal death. The very purpose of all the Scriptures is to bear witness to Jesus and make people wise to salvation through Jesus Christ.

Luke writes that after Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to his disciples and “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Lk 24:45–47). Thus, after Jesus rose from the dead, the apostles read the Scriptures differently than they had before. In Acts and the Epistles, we see many examples of how the apostles built on Jesus’s own teaching and interpreted the Scriptures in the light of the risen Christ. So, the apostle Paul, as a matter of custom, would go to the synagogue of whatever city he was in and show people how the Scriptures (the OT) are to be understood in light of Jesus,

whom he believed was the Christ. Today, gospel-centered people still endeavor to emulate Jesus and the apostles and practice gospel-centered interpretation in our own lives and ministries. Failure to do this is to misread the Scriptures and to fail to use them as intended.

Because of our belief that the gospel is the central message of the Scriptures and the reason the Scriptures are given to us, we also assume that every question about the meaning of a text is a “gospel question.” This is because questions about the meaning of Scripture texts are questions about texts that have been given to us by God for the sake of the gospel. This does not mean that we try to squeeze an explicit gospel message from every text (like a proverb or a Levitical law, for example) or allegorize a text so that we can make it about Jesus. It does mean that we pursue the interpretation and application of every text in light of the Bible’s central message. It also means that we do not interpret any text in a way that is in opposition to its central message. In this sense, we say not only that the Scriptures are the norm for the gospel, but also that the gospel is the norm in the Scriptures.²⁴

For example, texts about good works find their appropriate place and interpretation in light of the central message of the gospel and not apart from it—otherwise they will be misinterpreted. We don’t neglect these passages, but we understand them and apply them in light of the gospel.²⁵

Likewise, the idea that some books in the canon must be read in the light of others and not vice versa is an interpretive practice stemming from our assumption that the gospel is the central message in the Scriptures and must not be distorted or marginalized. For example, we interpret the book of Revelation in the light of the gospels or Romans and not vice versa. We do this because these books clearly and coherently set forth the truth of the gospel of Jesus. If we forget this, we will inevitably go astray in the interpretation and application of Scripture. So, we use the books central to our faith and life to help us understand the symbols and images of an enigmatic book such as Revelation. The danger is that if the imagery of Revelation is interpreted independently of the gospel as it is laid out in these central books, the message of salvation itself will be distorted.

Related to this assumption about the centrality of the gospel is the assumption that because the gospel proclaims a real God’s actual historical redemption of his created world, reality underlies biblical assertions. This is in contrast to the gospelism described above. As Robert Preus writes, “The referents of theological language exist. At times, the Scriptural Word simply describes what is already real (God, creation, sin); at times the Scriptural Word creates the reality (Christ’s body and blood in the Sacrament, conversion.) But in every case this profound Biblical realism is recognized by the Confessions and is alluded to and *used* hermeneutically.”²⁶

Keeping the gospel central in interpretation does not mean that the historical reality behind Scripture’s accounts of God’s actions throughout history can be denied

or downplayed. gospel-centered interpreters do not deny the historical reality behind the events recorded in the rest of Scripture because to do so would undermine the truth of the gospel and deny the faith.

This commitment to the reality behind the biblical assertions does not mean that faithful Lutherans will always agree on the exegesis of the details of individual texts. A person who disagrees with someone on how they interpret a text must not summarily label (and dismiss) that person as a gospel reductionist. To do so is to misapply the label and misunderstand the nature of the problem. There are many details of texts over which faithful Christians can disagree without being gospel reductionists. Our quia subscription to the Confessions for example, is a subscription to the doctrine they confess. It does not entail agreement with the interpretation of every particular text in the Book of Concord.

For gospel-centered theologians, the gospel is both the starting point and the goal of theology. Because while Scripture is the source of our doctrine, the gospel is the source of our faith itself. The gospel creates personal faith. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Rom 1:16). As I said above, only after a person comes to faith in Jesus and confesses him as Lord, do they begin to read the Scriptures as they are meant to be read. And it is only after a person comes to faith in Christ that they see how our body of doctrinal teaching fits together into a coherent whole and how it is all related to and held together by the central doctrine, the gospel.

For gospel-centered theologians, the gospel is both the starting point and the goal of theology.

So, for example, the account of God's creation cannot be fully understood apart from the gospel accounts of Jesus's redemption. If interpreted separately, both text and doctrine will be distorted. The same goes for every other doctrine—Election, Sanctification, the Sacraments, Eschatology and so

on—all find their meaning in relation to the gospel. Robert Preus says it well, “The *sola gratia* and *sola fide* of the gospel are the source and means of my salvation; the *sola scriptura* is the source of my preaching and teaching. Recognition of the formal principle (*sola scriptura*) and loyalty to it *are the fruits of faith in the gospel* [emphasis mine]; faith in the gospel is the result of a Word and preachment drawn from and normed by the Scriptures.”²⁷

Again, gospel-centered Christians do not reverse the order, and through rational arguments or proofs first attempt to convince people of the truth of the Scriptures and then only after that work to convince them of the truth of the gospel. This approach reduces (and marginalizes) the gospel through which the Holy Spirit works. It also

reduces the authority of the Scriptures by holding God's word accountable to human ways of reasoning and human canons of evidence. This is a precarious move.²⁸

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the nature of the relationship between the gospel and Scripture in our theology. I have tried to show that when the relationship becomes unbalanced, in one way or the other, it has important implications for the teaching and life of the church. This means that the Lutheran understanding of the relationship between the gospel and Scripture is not only an intellectual construct. As gospel-centered people, we embody it in our lives.

For example, *being* gospel centered should be evident in the way we emphasize *proclamation* over *explanation* in our preaching and in how we make the proper distinctions between law and gospel. It should come out in the way we minister to people who are suffering inexplicably and in how we talk with people about their doubt and fear. It becomes evident in the place that the Sacraments play in our lives together. It should especially be evident in the way we treat each other in our daily lives. gospel-centered people are grace-centered people. This means that we not only *know about* or *assent* to the centrality of the gospel and the doctrine of justification, it also means the Spirit, through this good news, has powerfully transformed our lives so that we begin to treat each other with the grace and forgiveness that our Lord so generously gives to us (Gal 5:22–23).

In relation to this last point, it would be good for all of us to reflect on the implications of Paul's word to the church at Colossae. Here he beautifully describes the way that the lives of gospel-centered people embody that gospel for others:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. (Col 3:12–15)

The expansiveness of Paul's vision for the lives of his people is striking to me. In the light of this text, I recognize my own small heart and my need for God's forgiveness for some of the habits and practices into which I have fallen. As one who has received so much grace, why do I so often show so little grace to others? I am praying for the strength to live and teach with this expansive love, as a gospel-centered Christian. I hope you will too.

Endnotes

- 1 Proceedings of the Fiftieth Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, New Orleans, 1973, Resolution 3-09, 136, also labels gospel reductionism as *gospelism*; the descriptions in the section that follows are based primarily on Proceedings, Resolution 3-09, 133-139, and the following documents: Robert Preus, “Biblical Authority in the Lutheran Confessions,” *Concordia Journal* (January 1978): 16–23; Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. *Gospel and Scripture: The Interrelationship of the Material and Formal Principles in Lutheran Theology*. November 1972; Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*. 1973; each of these are still valuable to the church today, and I encourage readers to look back over them for fuller discussions of what I outline here.
- 2 Resolution 3-09, 139.
- 3 Theologians use the term “norm” to refer to a standard by which other things are measured or judged. A norm is used to measure or evaluate the quality of other things. Thus, in Lutheran theology, Scripture is the only rule and guiding principle according to which other teachings are to be evaluated and judged. As FC Ep, Binding Rule 7 says, “Holy Scripture alone remains the only judge, rule, and guiding principle, according to which, as the only touchstone, all teachings should and must be recognized and judged, whether they are good or evil, correct or incorrect” (Robert Kolb, T. J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 487.
- 4 Resolution 3-09, 139; Theologians use the term “material principle” to refer to the central thought of a theological system, and they use the term “formal principle” to refer to the source on which all teaching is based and the standard by which it is judged (cf., F. E. Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America*, 4th ed. (St. Louis: CPH, 1961), 574.
- 5 Resolution 3-09, 136; at a fundamental level, gospel reductionism calls into question the content of the gospel itself. If that message is not normed by the Scriptures, then what norms it? Who decides, and by what standard, what counts as a distortion? (I would like to thank Dr. Nafzger for this helpful comment.)
- 6 J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 28–29; for other detailed descriptions of Fundamentalism and its beliefs, see; George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1976); Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicalism is not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011).
- 7 Smith, *The Bible*, 4–15; Packer, *Fundamentalism*, 16–40; John M. Frame, “In Defense of Something Close to Biblicalism: Reflections on *Sola Scriptura* and History in the Theological Method,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 (1997): 272–275.
- 8 Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible*, 17–27.
- 9 Ironically, basing one’s faith on an infallible Bible becomes idolatry.
- 10 Arand, “The Scientist as a Theologian of the Cross,” *Concordia Journal* 43 (Summer 2017): 24–31.
- 11 Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 153.
- 12 Walter Roehrs, “The Word in the Word,” *CTM* 25 (February 1954): 82, says, “In an absolute and final sense it is only faith in Christ Jesus that snatches me from the powers of darkness and translates me into the inheritance of light. Scripture answers the question: ‘What must I do to be saved?’ thus: ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved and thy house’ (Acts 16:31). Scripture knows of no other foundation of saving faith than that which is laid: Jesus Christ.”
- 13 Uuraas Saarnivaara, “Written and Spoken Word,” *The Lutheran Quarterly* O.S. 2 (1950): 168.
- 14 Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 125.
- 15 For an example of how a Fundamentalist describes the task of interpreting Scripture in a non-Christological way, see Packer, *Fundamentalism*, 101–114, where he gives direction for the “scientific study of Scripture” but never mentions what it means to read the Scriptures in the light of Christ; see also Smith,

The Bible Made Impossible, 115, who describes a sermon that he heard on a text from James that was, strictly speaking, biblical. However, the preacher said almost nothing about Jesus and the gospel. Instead, he left the impression that Christianity is essentially moralism and the Christian life consists of trying to do better.

- 16 Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 116–117, makes the same observation when he says, “Biblicists are often so insistent that the Bible is God’s only complete, sufficient, and final word that they can easily forget in practice that before and above the Bible as God’s written word stands Jesus Christ, who is God’s living Word and ultimate and final self-revelation”; John M. Frame, “In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism: Reflections on *Sola Scriptura* and History in Theological Method,” *WTJ* 59 (1997): 272–274, discusses the idea of some Biblicists that there is a sense in which Scripture “speaks of everything,” though not always directly, but indirectly as well.
- 17 For full treatments of this topic, see Timothy Saleska, “The Uses of Scripture in the Christian Community,” in Robert Kolb and Theodore J. Hopkins, eds. *Inviting Community* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2013), 71–84, and especially Peter H. Nafziger, *These are Written: Toward a Cruciform Theology of Scripture* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 103–113.
- 18 In the OT, God attached his promise to circumcision (Gn 17), to the bronze serpent (Nm 21:4–9), to the Day of Atonement (Lv 16), to the sacrifices (Lv 2–7) and so on; in the NT, he attached his promises to Baptism (Mt 28:19–20, Rom 6:1–4), and the Lord’s Supper (Lk 22:19).
- 19 John 20:21, Romans 10:14–17; Luther, in SA III.4, reminds us that the gospel gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because of God’s extravagant grace: through the spoken word in which forgiveness is preached, through baptism, through the Lord’s Supper, through the power of the Keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters (emphasis mine). For this last point, he cites Matthew 18:[20], “Where two or three are gathered . . .” (Kolb, Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 319).
- 20 Packer, *Fundamentalism*, 47; see also Packer, *Fundamentalism*, 85–94, where he discusses specifically “the Word of God” but only in terms of written Scripture.
- 21 Frame, “In Defense,” 274; see also Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 4–5, who describes this tendency in detail.
- 22 Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 4–10.
- 23 Walter Roehrs, “The Word in the Word,” 105, says, “God speaks before and after the incarnation in the Word and words uttered and written by human beings, also in His own determined manner, in order to bring men to good news of this eternal plan of redemption and its accomplishment, and in order to create in men the faith which accepts this accomplished salvation through the power with which He has invested these words.”
- 24 *Gospel and Scripture*, 7.
- 25 For a good example, see Luther’s sermon, “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” in *Luther’s Works* 35:161–174.
- 26 Preus, “Biblical Authority,” 23.
- 27 Preus, “Biblical Authority,” 20; see also *Gospel and Scripture*, 17–18.
- 28 Paul’s sermon on Areopagus recorded in Acts 17 is *not* a counter-example. In this text, he starts with what the Athenians already agree with (that they are very religious) and a god they already worship (the unknown god that he has come to make known for them). He quotes their poets and enters their thought world to show that there is some common ground between them. Paul does not try to convince them that the biblical account of the world and history is correct before he preaches Jesus. He starts from a perspective that they might have in common. And he does this so that he might create room in their ears and hearts to hear the proclamation of Jesus and to bring them to repentance. The goal of his sermon is clearly to proclaim Jesus.

Gracious and Multi-Faceted When Theology Drives Involvement in the Life Arena

Jeffrey Gibbs



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New Testament eschatology, and Matthew. His most recent publication is the conclusion to his three-volume Matthew Commentary, *Matthew 21:1–28:20* published by Concordia Publishing House.

After a Seminary Life Team meeting last year, a seminarian came up and said, “I need to talk to you about something.”¹ Given the vagaries of life and the wide spectrum of student concerns, I was ready to hear almost anything from him. What I heard from him was this: “I can’t get any of my seminary friends to come and check out the Life Team. They think we’re just a bunch of angry

Republicans, and I try to tell them that’s not what we are about. But they won’t believe me.”

I was not surprised by his comment. I’ve heard this before, and given how students so quickly enter, study, learn, and leave the seminary community, it presents itself as an on-going need for teaching and correction. The basic problem is this. Perfectly normal LCMS people—even very pious LCMS people preparing for ordained ministry—too often assume that it is one’s *political* commitments that lead people to engage with issues about valuing and protecting human life. And perhaps for some people—even many people—that is their answer to the question of “Why do I esteem and seek to preserve human life?” Our American students have been taught this by the culture, and they *assume* that politics is the reason why one might work to defend and preserve human life.

But that’s not my reason.² For my part, I am a member of no political party, and I often find myself without a political home as I consider the issues of our day. Be that as it may, my point is that I have not found my way to participation in life issues

and in the life arena because of anything other than *theological* commitments (and the inspiring example of my wife). Moreover, I would argue that no thinking Christian should have mere political reasons or commitments as the foundation for their involvement in the life arena. Our allegiance in all of life is to the Lord Jesus Christ and to his words, and it is to his truth that we should look for the reasons why we care about human life at all stages and ages. What some of our student body did not know, then, was the answer to this question: How does our theology and the truth as it is in Christ Jesus necessarily bring us to caring actively about human life?

Partly in response to the seminary student's words, during the 2018–2019 academic year the Life Team sponsored a basic sort of event. We called it, "Mercy, Not Politics: Affirming All of (Human) Life." The goal was to proffer to students and to others a foundational, theological perspective on human life, and why *as Christians* we are to value life and seek to protect and preserve it. This simple essay is a written form of my remarks on that gathering.

This reflection has four parts. Part 1 ponders the truth that the Eternal Son of God became flesh as our brother, and how that teaches us to recognize and know human life when we see it. Part 2 suggests that the biblical teaching concerning the image of God in humanity should not bear the weight that many seem to be putting on it. Part 3 dwells briefly on the universality of the gospel work of Jesus Christ, and how that provides the major reason why all human life has value and should be esteemed and protected. The essay's part 4 offers a few comments on how our theology might shape and flavor all that we as Christians do in matters pertaining to the life arena. This final section is reflected in the title I've given to the essay, "Gracious and Multi-Faceted."

The Incarnation of God's Son Defines and Demonstrates What Counts as Human Life

Jesus himself reveals what it means to be human. It's a simple statement, but I think it is of central importance, more important than any arguments based on science or moral reasoning. The simple statement follows from the truth that Jesus is both substitute and representative for the entire human race. As substitute, he takes our place—he is like us in every way, except without sin. As representative, the Lord sums up humanity in his identity as the second Adam, as Israel reduced to one, and so forth. This means that we learn what it means to be human by looking at Jesus. To repeat the point in a slightly different way, the *theological definition of "human life" is christologically derived.*

This is true both in the sense of his own life and its course, as well as in the sense of what it means to *act* as one who is fully human. As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus is our brother, and he remains so forever. On the one hand, there was a time when the eternal Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, was not also a man. Since his

conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary, however, he has been and always will remain fully human—the perfect human, in fact. Humble no longer, now our risen and ascended brother has reached his goal, and (in the words of the book of Hebrews) “been perfected.” To consider, then, how human life is defined by Jesus the Lord, we can begin at the end, and work backwards in brief but (perhaps) suggestive fashion.

Jesus is risen from the dead, the firstfruits of God’s new humanity. His complete conquest of death presages our own experience as believers. In bringing life and immortality to light in all of its blinding fullness, Jesus reveals God’s plan for his human creatures. God’s salvation entails eternal, embodied life, filled with all holiness and beauty and glory. In his resurrection, Jesus reveals what it means to be completely and fully human. All of Jesus’s disciples are destined for immortality and glory. This alone has implications for how we regard one another *and all other persons*; I think of C. S. Lewis’s sermon, “The Weight of Glory”:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people.³

By implication, the course of Jesus’s ministry also reveals what a grievous thing it is for human beings to die. Jesus did not, of course, deserve to die, but he died because of his calling from the Father to save us. We all *deserve* to die—every listing on the obituary page reveals a sinner. Caring for our fellow dying human creatures, however, means that we will regard their death as inevitable, but not as good. To be human as God originally intended—and as God finally purposes—entails *bodily life*.

Jesus our brother reveals what it means to be and live as a human creature, a human person. During his earthly ministry Jesus defined true human existence in his perfect obedience to God, his Father, and in his perfect love for his neighbor. From one perspective, in fact, it was Jesus’s full and perfect humanity that caused him to be hated, rejected, and crucified. Thus we see the present fallenness of our race; humanity’s own perfect exemplar was one who evoked hatred and opposition. And yet it was even for those who hated and opposed him that Jesus did what he did (more on that below). This reveals that we, too, are at our most profoundly and deeply human when we live to honor and obey our Creator, when we live for the

To live in community, in family, with each taking his or her turn at being now strong and able, now weak and dependent—this, too, is being human.

most natural reading of the relevant NT texts reveals that Jesus grew up as the eldest child in a family that included at least six other children born to Joseph and Mary—four brothers and at least two sisters (Mt 13:55).⁴ Here, too, the Son of God shows what it means to be human according to God’s design. Human beings should be and need to be in families, with parents guiding and nurturing them. When human brokenness shatters the family, God still desires a family for his creatures: “though a mother forsake her child, He will not abandon you.” In Jesus, God provides a family that does not depend on biological descent or relation. Water shows itself thicker than blood, and we name our fellow Christians as brothers and sisters, with One who is our heavenly Father. To live in community, in family, with each taking his or her turn at being now strong and able, now weak and dependent—this, too, is being human. As Gilbert Meilaender wrote some years ago, “I want to burden my loved ones.”⁵

Jesus’s human life included his birth from his mother, Mary of Nazareth, while she was still a virgin. Our brother emerged from the womb, and despite pious speculation over the centuries, the birth of Jesus seems to have happened in the ordinary fashion. Matthew 1:25–2:11 and Luke 2:6–7 indicate nothing to the contrary. The credal articulation is appropriately simple: “(He was) born of the Virgin Mary.” To be human is to be born (with the apparent exception of Adam and Eve).

The eternal Logos did not, however, become incarnate on the first Christmas, despite the choice of John 1 for the Christmas Gospel reading (“and the Word became flesh”). Christmas is the festival of the *nativity*, the birth of Jesus—not his *incarnation*. His human life had already begun in the womb of Mary, the Virgin. The virginal *conception* of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit does not eliminate or denigrate Jesus’s humanity—it celebrates it. As remarkable and unique a plan as the virginal conception was, it does not bypass God’s own institution. Yes, Jesus was

good of our neighbor. This means that preserving and esteeming the lives of others, including our enemies, is profoundly human behavior—because the perfect Man did it perfectly.

Before the onset of his baptism and his ministry in Israel, Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man. He lived, moreover, in a family, being subject to the authority of Joseph and Mary. In my view, the

A statue of the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56) at the historic Church of the Visitation in Ein Karem, Jerusalem (Credit: Wikimedia Commons / Deror avi).

MAGNIFICAT ANIMA MEA
ECCE QUI SITUS EST
POTUS FIRMUS ET SOBER
SPUS NOBIS UNUS
OMNIBUSQUE VIBIS

مرا خجسته
نام او
شماران پراکنده کرده است
یاخته است
است زانده است
نده است
اوان
گفته



conceived without the agency of a human father. But yes, Jesus *was conceived*. God uses *conception in the womb* to show us what it means to be human, and to inaugurate his plan to save us. As with Jesus's birth, the scriptural texts regarding his conception employ the expected verbs. The angel said to Mary, "You will conceive (συλλάμψῃ) in your womb" (Lk 1:31; see also Lk 1:24, 36; 2:21). The angel said to Joseph, "For that [child] which is begotten (τὸ γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν) in her is from the Holy Spirit."⁶ In a perfectly natural use of language, Elizabeth, likely during her own third trimester, in the Spirit greets Mary and names her, "The mother of my Lord" (Lk 1:43). Elizabeth's Lord lives in the womb of Mary. Jesus, our brother, began his life as one *unborn*. We have every reason to think that the Lord of all was an embryo, and then a fetus, and when the time came, he was born. In Mary's womb, he was Jesus. He is now Jesus. He will always be Jesus.

Jesus, our brother, defines what it means to be human. In becoming human Jesus has, in one sense, honored and sanctified our humanity by taking it on himself. To be sure, we and all other humans have majored in dragging whatever dignity might accrue to our humanity through the filth. But in Jesus, God has defined what it means to be human—perfectly human. This christological or incarnational approach to the question of human life does not depend on the categories of science, or law, or any other framework, however valid those might be in a discussion. My suggestion is that *as Christians*, the incarnation of the eternal logos provides a rationale by which we can know human life, and also (at least by implication) begin to esteem it at every stage, from conception to family, in love and into death and then out of death and on into immortality.

Although it moves in the right direction, it is only by implication (or indirectly) that the incarnation itself provides the foundation for *esteeming and valuing* all human life. The incarnation directly teaches us what it means to be human. For a strong foundation for why we should regard human life as *precious*, however, we need only turn our attention to the gospel of God's free grace in Christ for all humanity and for every person. Before considering the life-affirming message of the gospel per se, however, I would like to invite my readers to rethink the extent to which the notion of the *imago Dei* provides support for a full-bodied, life-affirming posture. I have three misgivings about how Christians seem routinely to depend on the *imago Dei*.

The Image of God in Man Is an Inadequate Basis for Esteeming Human Life

When Christians speak about ethics, about life issues, and about *why* human life should be esteemed and preserved, it's common for the truth that human beings are "made in the image of God" to receive a prominent place. I have, interestingly, even heard non-Christian-but-religious people also speak in these terms, even if vaguely. It almost seems to be a self-evident truth. People are significant; human life

should be (more or less) esteemed and protected because “we’re all made in God’s image.” My further impression is that this theologoumenon has become increasingly popular among Lutheran writers and thinkers. I offer only a few simple observations here about this concept, and I realize to some extent how much theologizing has gone into discussion of the *imago Dei*. I would suggest, however, for three reasons why the *imago Dei* should not be a main, or at least not *the* main theological undergirding for our position on life issues.

The first reason consists of a simple exegetical observation. The theme of fallen humanity bearing the image of God is a minor theme, not a main one, *in the Scriptures themselves*—despite the extent to which great efforts have gone into explicating and developing the idea. To be sure, the creation account in Genesis explicitly teaches that in some undefined but unique sense, humanity alone, Adam and Eve, were created in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:27). Moreover, even after the fall the image of God in man still pertains in some sense, as two passages seem to indicate. Murder is forbidden as a crime worthy of capital punishment in Genesis 9:6, and cursing a Christian brother or sister is forbidden in James 3:9—and for the same reason, namely, God created humanity in his own image/likeness. In all of the post-fall history of humanity and of the Scriptures’ speaking, however, these are the only two verses that use the *imago Dei* as the *general* basis for how we should regard and treat one another (cf. 1 Cor 11:7, which conveys a much more narrow application). The “image of God in man,” is not exactly a major theme in the Christian Scriptures. This is my first reason for cautioning against making it too important in specifically *Christian* ways of thinking and speaking.⁷

My second reason for not leaning too heavily on this theme is this: *no one knows to what the image of God in man refers—especially the image of God in fallen humanity*. To be more precise, the history of interpretation has seen many attempts to define the image of God in man, but no attempt has won the day or become a consensus view. The reason this is the case is an important one, namely, the Bible itself does not offer sufficient clarity to settle the matter. In the Lutheran tradition, “truth, holiness, and righteousness” form the essence of God’s image in Adam and Eve before the fall. That is, the image of God in Genesis 1 chiefly concerns the vertical relationship of man to God. The conclusion then follows by definition that the image of God was completely *lost* to humanity in the fall and is only restored in Christ, who himself is the image of God (Col 1:18).⁸ As true and important an observation as this is, Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 at the least can be read as employing the language of the

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divine image in humanity in some broader sense. Especially in the case of James 3:9, there seems to be some sense in which even fallen humanity has or is seen in terms of the image of God.

Whether Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 teach that in some sense fallen humanity retains the image of God, in contemporary discussions of life issues and the esteeming and preserving of human life, even Lutherans do not always hew to the traditional Lutheran understanding as briefly described above. That understanding, strictly speaking, would deny the image of God to non-Christians (or at least make non-Christians only potential candidates for bearing the image of God), since the image is only renewed *in Christ*. I have not heard Lutherans speak this way, however. It seems that Lutherans are increasingly defaulting to a general understanding, at least on the popular level: “We’re all made in God’s image.”⁹

My second point in sum is this: It is apparently not possible to describe what it means for humanity to have been originally created in God’s image. Further, it is not clear in what way (if at all) humanity in general still is to be regarded as bearing the image of God. It’s a little perilous, then, to make this the main (or a major) reason why every human life should be valued and protected. It’s true—but it won’t bear the weight that people seem to want to put upon it. This brings me to the third reason why I could wish for less of an emphasis on the *imago Dei* in Christian thinking that pertains to the value and protection of human life.

To transition to my third point, recall how “the image of God in humanity” is often understood, namely, *as some quality that is inherent to all human beings*. This makes me theologically nervous; it puts an emphasis upon some quality that is intrinsic to human beings themselves. Something that we possess or what we are by nature or by right becomes the “why”; something native to me provides the basis for others to regard my life as worth esteeming and preserving. I don’t want to sound like more of a curmudgeon (or misanthrope) than I actually am here. At this point, however, my criticism is widening beyond the specific use of the *imago Dei*. The question is this: to what intrinsic quality in all human life could we *as Christians* point without hesitation, and confidently say, “This makes us valuable; this quality in us means that all human life should be preserved and esteemed”? Again, I acknowledge that other frameworks and points of reference might conclude that there is something about us that makes our lives valuable, worth protecting. One thinks of the claim in the Declaration of Independence that our Creator has endowed all people with unalienable rights. Now we have these rights; they are our possession. This gives us value.

This is, however, not a *Christian* way of speaking or thinking. The move to find human value in something that inheres in us cuts against the grain of Christian truth on the deepest level; it runs the risk of asserting worth independently of the Creator God who made us and redeemed us. Nothing within us has called forth God’s care

for us as Creator or Redeemer. Rather, in the Scriptures it is primarily God's own character and grace that are the source and cause for his concern. And it is God's own attitudes and actions that are to motivate Christians in their relationships with others, especially others whose lives are in peril or in special need.

I would encourage my readers to consider "demoting" or at least carefully nuancing how the *imago Dei* functions in their thinking. It's biblical, it's there, and it can be useful. But it's a minor biblical emphasis, we aren't even sure what it means, and its overuse can potentially crowd out more fruitful Christian ways of speaking and thinking about life issues.

I have already suggested that the incarnation of the Son of God teaches us much. Jesus is our brother, and therefore the course of his life from conception in Mary's womb to eschatological glory defines and describes what it means to be human. Through the incarnation, then, we know what human life is—and by implication the incarnation affords a worth to all human lives. A second truth, however, can provide a more explicit foundation for valuing all of human life. That truth is the gospel message itself, and especially the fact that the gospel message of Christ's life, death, and resurrection is *for all people, and thus imparts an "alien" value to all human life.*

The Gospel of God's Son Imparts Value to All of Human Life

Not all Christians will agree with all of the following statements. I anticipate that Lutherans (and perhaps many others) would, however, accept them as fully biblical. So I shall just lay them out in quick fashion—they form the basis for my claim that the gospel of God's Son imparts value to all of human life, and to every human life.

- The work of God in Christ was, in God's heart and mind, intended for the benefit of all humanity. God's saving deeds in Christ are necessary for the entire human race, and they are sufficient to save everyone and anyone without exception.
- God's redeeming a people for himself will also be the means by which the entire creation is renewed and restored. When the glory of God's children is revealed, then the longing of creation will be over (Rom 8:18–21).
- No human being is excluded from the universally valid and sufficient work of Christ on the cross and through the empty tomb. Christ died and rose for *all*, without exception, including his enemies—including my enemies.
- Of course, faith (itself God's unearned and undeserved gift) is required for the benefits of Christ's work to be applied to any given individual. Without faith, God's universally offered gifts are not received.
- Nevertheless, the promise of reconciliation and life in Jesus Christ is universally applicable. That is, I can say to any human being that I encounter, "Jesus died on the cross *for you*. Jesus rose from the dead *for you*." To repeat, I can say this *to anyone*, and *to everyone*, and it will be true.

This universally valid gospel proclamation flows out of God's free grace in Christ. It is evoked by nothing positive in me, in you, in us as human creatures. If one wanted to identify, in a sort of paradoxical way perhaps, something within us that called forth God's work in Christ, it would be this: our neediness and helplessness. Our negative is met by the overwhelming positive of God's unmerited kindness. This is only another way, however, of saying that the gospel is good news for the powerless and needy, for the unable and the ungodly, for the child and the outcast, and the least and the powerless. That is to say, the gospel is for us all—even for those who never receive the gifts.

In terms of the doctrine of justification, Lutherans and others declare with joy that Christ has become our righteousness, and that in fact we sinners who trust in Christ have thus received an *alien righteousness*. This status comes from outside of us. It is not *native* to who we were or are, but it is nevertheless God's gift. We are in the right with God now; God himself has justly settled his righteous contention against us for Christ's sake and through Christ alone. This right standing comes from outside of us because it comes from Christ—in that sense, it is *alien*.

I would suggest that it is also valid to speak of Christ's universal gospel work as investing or imparting to all people an *alien value*. God regards us as precious for Christ's sake, and—here is the payoff for life issues in our day—we can regard one another and every human life as precious, as possessing an alien value. This does not have anything to do with us, except in the sense that all people are in need and all people from conception onward are the objects of God's concern. Everyone and anyone can receive through faith the benefits of Christ's work because he did what he did for all. This communicates, offers, invests an alien value into every human life.

Our negative is met by the overwhelming positive of God's unmerited kindness.

These two great truths—the gospel itself along with the doctrine of the incarnation of the Son of God—provide a broad and unshakable position from which to approach the task of preserving and esteeming all of human life and every human life.

We know human life from its beginning in the womb to physical death because our Brother lived such a life—and more. We love one another, our neighbor and even our enemies, because God in Christ has loved us all. For God thus loved *the world*, after all, and the invitation to come to Jesus and find rest has a universal scope. And the life that the risen Son has in his Easter and ascension victory is a life that is offered to every person.

Conclusion: Gracious and Multi-faceted Christian Ministering in the Life Arena

From these two broad bases—the incarnation and the gospel itself—Christians can

engage the life arena. How should we do that, and what should we do? Here I will offer only a couple of observations; I intend that they will flow directly, as result follows cause, from the dual theological bases of the incarnation and the gospel.

In the first place—the very first place—the doctrine of the incarnation and of the gospel’s universal applicability can and must and will become a well and a font of blessing and peace for Christians before they even do one thing in the life arena. Christ incarnate reveals that I am one of God’s human creatures and implies that this is a very good thing indeed. That Christ’s work was and is for all means also that Christ is for *me*. God wants me to rejoice and rest and revel in the alien value that I have received, and in the alien righteousness by which I stand as fully pleasing and restored before God. Theologically driven involvement in the life arena changes *me*, and turns me once again to rejoice in God’s undeserved favor in Jesus. In that truth and strength, God desires that his people recognize and esteem and protect all of human life—as his own dear children, themselves cherished beyond comprehension.

In the second place, the power of these truths about the incarnation and about the universal gospel message should be sufficient to impel Christians—especially through the ministry of the local congregation, the partnership of pastor and people—to be involved in the life arena. Human lives are precious, and in need of protection, support, and ministry. Not to care is not an option. I am not speaking at all at this point about *political* involvement, but about the Christian service of mercy and compassion for the least and the neediest, in our congregations and around them. In every community, human lives are in peril. Prayerful, wise discernment will lead grace-filled believers into ways of esteeming and preserving all of human life. You won’t be able to make the world a better place. But we can labor on behalf of others in the name of the Lord, and that labor will not be in vain.

As we Christians engage others in the life arena, it is most fitting that we do so in a gracious way that befits the gospel that motivates us. The face that those around us must see is the face of compassion, not anger or outrage. We love because he first loved us. This is not to say that those who oppose the truth about human life will like us if we show a patient and gracious face to them; they may very well hate us all the more, and bitterly malign and unfairly trouble us. In this we may find ourselves truly following in our Master’s footsteps, as I Peter describes it: suffering wrongfully for doing good.

In the third place, In light of this theology, we can and should esteem and preserve human life—all of human life. This will prevent us from focusing only on

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the beginning of life, or only on the end of it. Our congregations will teach, and mentor, and serve in our communities in many different ways that bespeak our love for life. And what are some of the issues and needs with which we can engage?

The largest single life issue remains that of elective abortion. Under any estimate, elective abortion is the leading cause of death in the United States; an annual figure of 862,000 (number as of this writing) will not be too large, and may be much too small.¹⁰ We can teach that it is wrong to kill an unborn child, and we can help others to love and protect life in the womb, that is, *in the condition in which the Son of God (and every one of us) also found himself*. We can support ministries that help parents in crisis pregnancies. We can reckon with the staggering estimates of women and men in the United States who are post-abortive; they are everywhere, and they are in our congregations. As we speak and preach and live, we can give the message that Christ came into the flesh for us even after we have made terrible choices; his good news is for every sinner who longs to be forgiven and clean.

Human life is not only to be esteemed and preserved in the womb, of course. The doctrines of the incarnation and of the gospel's universal offer to forgiveness and life teach us to be gracious and *multifaceted*. It would take many words to devote even a brief mention to all of the life arena issues in which Christians can be involved with grace and truth. One thinks about the support and guidance needed as decisions about the end of life are made, and as individuals and families face those realities. There are silent, almost invisible griefs that require care and attention when couples experience the agony of infertility or loss through miscarriage. Caring for people who suffer with depression or are in danger of committing suicide comes to mind. All around us are people oppressed by poverty, and immigrants learning how to make their way in our midst.¹¹ Our congregations and families can seek to become safe places in the midst of cities and towns where violence threatens life every day. The list of "life arena issues" can go on and on.

Why should we as Christians care about these matters? Because God does. Why should we affirm and value and seek to preserve human life? Because God's gracious, undeserved favor means that in Christ he has imparted value to all of human life.

My reader will have noticed, I suppose, that I have not spoken of direct political activism in the life arena. I have reserved that for the end because it is of penultimate importance. Should Christians be active in the political realm? Yes, of course. What will we seek to do in the realm of politics? The short and overly simple answer is: Show love and concern for our neighbors, especially the weakest and most vulnerable. All the while, however, we must keep in mind that politics and political power can do real good (or real evil)—but it is not the church's primary mode of operation.

And the good that politics can accomplish is a limited one, as a moment's reflection on the issue of elective abortion in the United States will reveal. I can remember 1973, when the ability to choose to end human life in the womb was

legally located under the constitutionally protected right to privacy. It was a terrible moment in the history of the United States and of the world. In our day, however, I fear that some Christians have made the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* into a sort of Holy Grail—as if the power of political fiat can make the world a better place. I am not particularly knowledgeable in legal matters. My understanding, however, is that if *Roe v. Wade* were to be reversed, then the regulation of elective abortion would return to the state legislatures. We have seen, in recent years, that there would be some states in which abortion would be virtually outlawed, while other states would legalize and protect the ability to end an unborn child's life. So, would fewer children die if *Roe v. Wade* were reversed? Yes, and that would be a great good. Would reversing *Roe v. Wade* end elective abortion in the United States? No, it would not. Would the American people rise up and insist that their state legislatures protect the life of the unborn from the moment of conception? I do not think that would happen. Would many Americans be willing to allow abortions during the first trimester only? I don't know the answer, but I would not be surprised. (That is, by the way, when about 90 percent of all elective abortions happen now—during the first trimester.¹²) In the end, Christians should be involved in politics, seeking to influence our leaders and our laws in ways that show love to our neighbors: to the unborn, to the aged, to the poor and disabled, to immigrants, to all who are treated unjustly and whose lives are being demeaned or trampled or done away with.

Do Christians and Christian congregations have work to do, regardless of the legal conditions under which we as citizens live? Yes, we do, and it is empowered by our theology of the incarnation, and of the gospel itself. Whatever the law of the land may be, still we acknowledge one Lord, Jesus Christ. His incarnation shines the light on human life at all stages and all ages, and his gospel fills us with peace and hope, and sends us into our congregations and then into our communities to esteem and protect all of human life. This is why we do what we do in the life arena.

Endnotes

- 1 The Life Team is the student group that equips and educates for Christian involvement in the life arena. My wife, Renee, and I are the faculty sponsors.
- 2 In fact, my own political opinions are of secondary or tertiary significance, if they have significance at all. I don't mean to disparage involvement in civic affairs, per se. Like most of you who are reading this, however, my political opinions tend to be fairly uninformed and probably held more strongly than they deserve to be.
- 3 C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 14–15.
- 4 See the discussion in Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 732–736.
- 5 <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/03/i-want-to-burden-my-loved-ones>.
- 6 Students at times ask why the substantized participle in Matthew 1:20, τὸ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν, is grammatically neuter, “that which is begotten.” The most natural answer is that a normal Greek noun to be supplied is itself grammatically neuter, τὸ βρέφος.
- 7 In the NT, Paul utilizes the notion of “image” more frequently than any other writer. His use, however, is almost exclusively christological. That is, Christ is by nature the image of God, and *believers* (not humanity in general) are being remade/recreated into the image of Christ.
- 8 Formula of Concord, SD, 1:10 (Kolb-Wengert, 533). Also see the helpful discussion in Nafzger, Johnson, Lumppp and Tepker, *Confessing the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Systematic Theology*, 1:272–281.
- 9 Luther fully explicates the view that for all intents and purposes, the image of God was eradicated by the fall. See, e.g., *Luther's Works*, 1:61–68; 2:141–142. For a nicely nuanced popular essay, see the 2005 article by the Rev. James Lamb, “The Image of God and the Value of Human Life,” <https://www.lutheransforlife.org/article/the-image-of-god-and-the-value-of-human-life>.
- 10 Statistics are readily available on the internet but sometimes hard to interpret; one remembers Mark Twain's dictum. For one summary, see: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/09/18/number-of-abortions-us-drops-guttmacher-institute-study/2362316001/> The second leading cause of death (listed as “first,” of course) is heart disease, taking a total of about 650,000 lives: <https://www.medicalnews-today.com/articles/282929.php>.
- 11 I ask my reader not to assume that I am taking a political stance here that pertains to the United States and its laws regarding immigration. I am not doing that. I am saying that with not a few congregations, there will be needy immigrant populations close at hand who can receive gracious care and support. For a very balanced discussion of issues surrounding immigration, see the study produced by the LCMS' Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Immigrants Among Us* (<https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=DSlPJgMzRUIHw95YpjUdtDbKPQGR9y6h>.) One local St. Louis ministry that exemplifies this sort of service is Christian Friends of New Americans (<http://www.cfna-stl.org/>).
- 12 <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states>.

Christian Witness in the Present

Charles Taylor, Secularism, and *The Benedict Option*

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The contemporary Catholic philosopher and commentator on the current state of belief in the secular West, Charles Taylor, concludes his essay on “The Future of the Religious Past” by observing that “The varieties of religious past that have a future may be much greater than we have been led to suspect.” Taylor ponders that in spite of the many perceived advances of secularism, “a profound ambivalence remains. This

expresses itself in nostalgia the sense that something is missing, a hankering after some richer meaning.” Taylor’s magnum opus, *A Secular Age*, complexly seeks to answer the hankering question: why is it that belief in God was a societal given in the sixteenth century but today proves much harder to find, and yet, religion persists in many manifestations as wellsprings of fuller significance? The answer, according to Taylor, is complicated. Secularism develops not by subtraction or taking away God and classic formularies of spirituality, but more by sublimation, where past religious experiences become presently and persistently nebulous. In our secular age, the mélange of religious past permeates in prosaic ways from the popularity of the medieval informed meditative prayer of the Taizé community in France to the repackaging of ancient *vipassana* Buddhist meditation.

Taylor’s framing of the dilemmas and connections in expressions of belief and contemporary North American secular culture through the enduring varieties of religious past and nostalgia for something missing presents both a critique and

appropriation of Rod Dreher's popular *The Benedict Option*, a *New York Times* bestseller. *New York Times* columnist, David Brooks, deems it "the most discussed and most important religious book of the decade." A cursory Google search evidences *The Benedict Option's* continuing impact. Having moved from being Methodist to Roman Catholic to Orthodox, Dreher's approach in *The Benedict Option* is politically and ecumenically conservative. Inspired by the life and ministry of St. Benedict of Nursia, the founder of Western monasticism, Dreher proposes a strategy for Christians in a post-Christian nation. The premise of *The Benedict Option* is that American Christians must return to early Christianity for answers to today's cultural, political, and moral degenerations. Dryer states: "I have written the Benedict Option to wake up the church and to encourage it to act to strengthen itself, while there is still time. If we want to survive, we have to return to the roots of our faith, both in thought and in practice." The title of the book refers to the final sentence of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, and calls for a revival of the life and teaching of St. Benedict. *The Benedict Option* presents an example from the variety of religious past, and also a hankering for what is missing, namely a return to church history to find inspiration for how to live authentically as Christians in virtueless Western society. Taylor's concept of the varieties of religious past references the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American philosopher, William James, who, in *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*, sought to make sense of recurring religious phenomena without resorting to scientifically unfounded reasons. While James's approach is secular, it is also pragmatic, and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* features a nagging nostalgia for religious experiences from the past. James's use of past saints such as Theresa of Ávila and Martin Luther, and Dreher's focus on Benedict ignore their contextual and communal dimensions. While MacIntyre and Dreher call for a new Benedict patterned on the original, even a cursory reading of *The Benedict Option* reveals that this is solely a Benedict of twenty-first-century making instead of resembling the real monk of the early Middle Ages. Dreher stokes the longing for something missing in contemporary conservative American Christianity by making the past fit the present instead of letting the present be shaped by the past.

For better or worse, our present secular age has wedded the varieties of past Christian practices and beliefs with the struggle to achieve religious toleration and the development of pluralistic societies. Secularism may be defined and realized in different ways: for example, France's *laïcité* is more extreme than America's separation of church and state. Overall secularism (as an ism) eschews religion and sets limits on the role of faith in daily life. As pastors and leaders in the church realize daily, secularism makes its impact felt in the decreasing interest among Christians in living their faith publically. As Andrew Root, reflecting on the insights of Taylor puts it, amidst the "immanent frame" of secularism, "the pastor's most pressing calling and deepest question has become, How do we help those who no longer need a God

encounter the living God in their lives?” Secularism demarcates private belief from public life. While Christians live in the gospel and in their society, secularism perceives of this as an either/or rather than as a both/and. In response to the secularization of America, Dreher also structures *The Benedict Option* in terms of an either/or Christian engagement/disengagement with mainstream American culture.

Dreher advocates for the implantation of Christian villages on the edge of the empire as collective communities of secluded domestic monasteries. He writes, “Building communities of believers will be necessary as the number of Christians becomes thinner on the ground. Communities with a strong, shared mission will be necessary to start and to sustain authentically Christian, authentically countercultural schools.” These communities function throughout Dreher’s book as parallel Christian societies to American secular society. For example, economically, Christians “are also going to have to start building the Christian community’s businesses through disciplined shopping—that is, by choosing to direct their patronage to Christian-owned enterprises.” The entire book poses either/or stands, from the use of social media and the dangers of technology to the recommendation of Christian homeschooling. James K. A. Smith, who wrote *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, a readable condensation of *A Secular Age*, sums it up by suggesting “that what you get in Dreher is fundamentalism without the rapture.” Dreher’s either/or thinking is also a product of modernity and secularism which presents options between religious and non-religious, the profound and the profane. *The Benedict Option* fails to take seriously the creative tension of secular and sacred, devotion and vocation, as explicated in Saint Augustine’s two cities (the city of humanity and the city of God) to Martin Luther’s two kingdoms. Christians live in both temporal societies and in the hope of our heavenly commonwealth, and we inherit for better or for worse, the perdition and progress of the past.

When confronting contemporary Western secular society, Dreher turns to St. Benedict, but what about St. Augustine? After all, St. Augustine is the foundational Western theologian. Furthermore, while Benedict is considered the father of Western monasticism, he is not the only representative of monasticism in Christian history. Benedictine monasticism is one option among many that includes a wide range of styles, from the austerity of the early Cistercians to the silence of the Carthusians, and the urbanity of the Franciscans. Augustine’s *City of God* and his condemnations of the hedonism of Western Roman Empire make a brief appearance in *The Benedict*

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Option. Dreher favors the actions of Benedict over the thoughts of Augustine. In reviewing *The Benedict Option*, James K. Smith hopes that Christians will answer the more nuanced Augustinian call: “centering our lives in the life-giving practices of the body of Christ, but from there leaning out boldly and hopefully into the world for the sake of our neighbors.” Charles Taylor puts it this way: “If the Samaritan had followed the demands of sacred social boundaries, he would never have stopped to help the wounded Jew. It is plain that the Kingdom involves another kind of solidarity altogether, one that would bring us into a network of agape.” While Dreher contends for a sacred social boundary of Christians and non-Christians, Augustine and Taylor see the openness of leaning out from Christ into the secular realm through networks of agape. In addition to the call of Augustine to love others in the secular city with the hope of the city of God to come, there endures the tradition of Augustinian monasticism, which is firmly rooted in the temporal realm. Augustine’s Rule is a monastic rule that proved popular for clergy in the Middle Ages. Indeed, in the medieval period, *secular* referred to priests who served in parishes as opposed to the *religious* who prayed in monasteries. There was not one form of monasticism in the Western church, but many.

Three rules in particular proved influential in Western church history: The Rule of St. Augustine, Benedict’s, and the Rule of St. Francis of Assisi. The Benedictine monastery was multifaceted, a sacred center of prayer and work to regulate all of society, which is missing in Dreher’s one dimensional use of Benedict as paragon of partition from society. The Benedictine monks labored in the work of God for the betterment of society as a whole, and as Jean Leclercq observes, paved the way for the cultural flourishing of the Carolingian renaissance. As Benedict himself overviews in his rule, there are different kinds of monks with various tasks: monasticism is not monolithic. Francis’s pared-down rule was meant for mendicants serving in the towns, cities, and universities of the high Middle Ages. *Secular* literally means of the present age. While Christians should never limit their vision to the present, we see beyond to the age to come only dimly, walking thus far by faith. Yet we press on by faith together as the body of Christ in the world that Christ has overcome, being present for others in the present.

The alarm of secularism for Christians is real, but Dreher seems to miss what the theologian of missions, Samuel Zwemer, grasped. Zwemer spent his life in Christian witness to Muslims. He knew first hand the difficulties of preaching Christ crucified in non-Christian contexts. With confidence in Christ, Zwemer writes,

“The cross cannot be defeated.” Louis Massignon, the French Orientalist, once said to me, when he spoke of conditions in the Near East; of hope deferred, and plans thwarted, of the famine-stricken, exiled, martyred Armenian Christians; of political intrigues due to selfish ambition and un-Christian policies on the part of nations

called Christian. *“The Cross cannot be defeated, because it itself was defeat.”* Long have I pondered on this mystical utterance, which sums up the history of missions in a sentence, and sets forth the deepest distinction between Islam and Christianity historically considered.

Dreher’s either/or proposal for what it means to be Christian today lacks the patient humility and suffering servant ethos of the cruciform life. The Catholic philosopher and theologian, as well as expert on Christian-Muslim relations, David Burrell writes:

What could make this “good news” good? It was the fact, of course, that they were nonetheless enjoined to preach it—and “not as servants but as friends” (John 15:15). The very ones who failed to accept the women’s witness were themselves sent to give witness to a death they had avoided and a resurrection which they could not accept, which they could only preach “with broken and contrite hearts” (Psalm 51). There is no triumph here. But is not that what makes the news good—for them and for all who would hear the message so transmitted over multiple generations?

Dreher’s endgame is that secluded Christian communities, like the Benedictine monasteries of the dark ages, will triumph and bring back moral order to Western civilization. Yet the Christian life is ultimately about communion with God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and with one another in the place and time God has given us. Christians are to live peaceful and quiet lives in faith, hope, and love, instead of propagating the transformation of culture. The triumph of God is the defeat of the cross of Christ, and the good news of the gospel is the reality that the cross of Christ cannot be defeated.

Dreher paints a dire picture of early Christianity, but the actual experience of Christians in the Roman Empire was more complicated. As persecution of Christians raged off and on during the first four centuries of the Roman Empire, Christians consistently and courageously offered what Alan Kreider calls “the intriguing attraction of early Christianity.” Specifically, according to Kreider, Christians were committed to engaging Greco-Roman culture from within the empire. While Dreher consistently calls for finding a monastic and secure home of faith at the edge of the “American imperium,” the early Christians patiently critiqued the excesses of Hellenistic culture from within the cities and towns of the Roman world. The catechesis of early Christians, according to Kreider, resembled a contemporary Alcoholics Anonymous meeting rather than a classroom. The focus of early Christian catechesis in the contexts of the materialistic hedonism of the Roman Empire was primarily on changes in behavior and finding a Christ-informed balance of life in the world but not of the world. Kreider writes:

The early Christians were alert to the dominant cultural patterns of their civilization. They faced the task of inculturating their message in societies whose narratives and folkways they needed to evaluate; some they used, some they adapted, some they rejected. So they were able to draw upon the narratives and images of their time while working in their communities for a deep appropriation of a counternarrative of a God whose perfect self-disclosure is Jesus Christ.

Certainly, the Desert Fathers such as Saint Anthony the Great, as well as the simple steadfast faith of St. Macrina and St. Monica were appealing to many Christians, notably St. Augustine. Yet, it took a theologian enmeshed in worldly affairs, St. Athanasius, to make St. Anthony widely known, just as it was St. Gregory of Nyssa's bestseller *The Life of Macrina* that immortalized the Christ-like example of his sister. Early Christians were attracted by the heroics of monks and nuns and yet also active in the cities of the empire defending the orthodox faith and witnessing to Christ in many and various ways. Dreher presents a one-sided appraisal of early Christians vis-à-vis ancient pagan culture. Instead of an either/or approach to their situations, the early Christians proved remarkably nimble and creative in their critiques of and cooperation with ancient Roman society. They featured apologists as well as Desert Fathers and Mothers, pagan-trained rhetoricians, and culturally refined theologians. Christians cared for the poor and slaves, and attracted wealthy patrons. The early Christians were missionally engaged with all aspects of Greco-Roman culture and thought. In addition, Dreher presents the original Benedictines as cloistered exclusively from culture. St. Benedict wrote that he established "a school for the Lord's service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome." Benedict's Rule proved enduring precisely because of its moderation. The Benedict Rule not only offered monks a proper work-life balance of prayer and labor, it also bestowed upon medieval culture equilibrium of the sacred and the secular, eternity and temporality. In other words, even Benedict's Rule reveals a both/and instead of an either/or approach to Christianity and culture.

The Benedict Option concludes with two visions of the church in relation to contemporary culture: ark and wellspring. As in the rising tide of Noah, a new ark, according to Dreher, is needed to survive the flood of "liquid modernity," and stands for "a structure protecting its people from the deluge," while a wellspring beckons as "a source of refreshment and renewal." Dreher fails to adequately connect these visions to the mandate of Jesus to make disciples of all nations. For example, while the ark of Noah is one version of the ark motif in Christian theology, the ark of Mary is another: the church as Mary in which dwells Christ for the world. In the Middle Ages, grand churches constructed in the center of cities were often dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The symbolism points to Mary who followed the divine mandate and

served as the ark of Christ, wherein God assumed human nature in the incarnation of Christ for the manifestation of the new and eternal covenant of salvation of the world. So too the church is the public place where Christians are born again in baptism to new life for service in society. Just as God located his writings of the Torah in the Old Testament ark of the covenant, God located his Word of Life, Jesus Christ, in the ark of Mary as realized in the church, the body of Christ, who heralds the liberating way of love. Wellspring is indeed one way to conceptualize the ministry of the church, but so too are salt and light, and city on a hill, which is closer to what St. Benedict had in mind for his monastery. Dreher appears to have little interest in Christian witness



The earliest known depiction of Francis of Assisi (ca. 1229), a fresco at the Benedictine Abbey of Saint Scholastica in Subiaco, Italy (Credit: Wikimedia Commons).

through conversion of non-Christians. The conversion he suggests is for Christians to remove themselves from society instead of witnessing in truth and love to the lordship of Christ within society. Based on his research of the catechesis and mission in the early church to non-Christians, Kreider asks these relevant questions about Christian evangelism today, which are apropos for Dreher:

What if the theologians and pastors of our time, thinking missiologically in the tradition of the early Christians, pondered our era and proposed means of conversion that addressed its addictions that lead to ecological crisis? What if our churches catechized believers new and old into people, who, like Cyprian, “love the

poor”? What if they, like Justin, inculcated values, rooted in the teachings of Jesus, of sharing and praying for enemies?

The Greek word *kairos* can refer to fear and crisis, as well as to a favorable and beneficent time. Postmodernity presents the emergency and opportunity of what Taylor sees as something missing. David Burrell writes, “While modernity sought to supplant theological reflection with philosophical clarification, replacing narratives with theories, one of the features which renders postmodernity ‘post-’ is its tendency towards nonreduction, towards reconciling diverse modes of discourse in the interest of understanding what each mode seeks to express.” Christians living in postmodernity would do well not to reduce the fullness of Christ and Christian witness. Instead Christians today, following Burrell’s lead, would do better by reconciling diverse modes of discourse, from Gospel narratives to real-life descriptions of what it means to follow Jesus, for the sake of non-Christians to understand what each mode seeks to express, namely Christ, who fills all in all. Christians are mediators of the Mediator, Christ, in various ways. To rephrase Taylor, the varieties of Christian past that have a future may be much greater than we have been led to suspect. *The Benedict Option* expresses itself in a yearning for what is lost. By the guiding of the Holy Spirit and as grounded in the word, the Christian church throughout the world has followed a variety of visions of what it means to follow Jesus Christ, from wellspring to stars in the sky. Dreher limits his understanding of the church’s *kairotic* ministry to one option, when in the *chronos* of Christian history there have been, and continue to be, many—from providing for the poor to preaching Christ in the public square.

Charles Taylor points to a more compelling vision for following Christ in our secular age, and the late Jean Vanier testifies to the embodiment of Taylor’s suggestions. Taylor writes, “Here what springs out is the long-term vector in Latin Christendom, moving steadily over a half millennium towards more personal, committed forms of religious devotion and practice.” According to Taylor, “the fate of belief depends much more than before on powerful institutions of individuals, radiating out to others.” An example of this network of agape is the worldwide reach of the L’Arche communities. Unlike Dreher’s conceptualization of church as ark removed from the world, L’Arche

(which means ark) is an international organization committed to the creation and growth of homes for the intellectually disabled throughout the world. Founded by the Catholic humanitarian, Jean Vanier (1928–2019), L’Arche focuses on mutual relationships, and the dignity of every individual as made in the image of God. Today L’Arche communities and programs

Christians living in postmodernity would do well not to reduce the fullness of Christ and Christian witness.

*Christians are called to
cultivate the fruits of the
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are active in thirty-eight countries on five continents as signs of hope in a divided world. Analogous to Taylor and Smith, Vanier expresses the essence of L'Arche, which leans out boldly and hopefully into the world for the sake of our neighbors, when he writes "since society is made up of individuals, as we open up to others and allow ourselves to be concerned with their condition, then the society in which we live must also change and become more open. We will begin to work together for the common good." Taylor's *A Secular Age* charts the modern and postmodern search for the common good of human flourishing. Commenting on Taylor's accounting of human flourishing and the need to put God first and the needs of our neighbors second, John Starke adds, "Christians have known all along that human flourishing (or fullness) comes indirectly. Christianity teaches that if you die to yourself and participate with Christ in faith and obedience you get human flourishing in the form of joy, a fruit of the Spirit." Christians are called to cultivate the fruits of the spirit for the welfare of the church and world. While secularism makes this difficult, nonetheless, this is the time and place in which God by his providence has placed us. Taylor concludes: "If ours tends to multiply somewhat shallow and undemanding spiritual options, we shouldn't forget the spiritual costs of various kinds of forced conformity: hypocrisy, spiritual stultification, inner revolt against the Gospel, the confusion of faith and power and even worse. Even if we had a choice, I'm not sure we wouldn't be wiser to stick with the present dispensation." To put it simply, we can't go back. By word and Spirit, we can only seek to make sense of the here and now, and, in Christ, hope for the life of the world to come. In this now but not yet Christian life, between the present and the parousia, Taylor encourages Christians by observing, "the retreat of Christendom involves both loss and gain. Some great realizations of collective life are lost, but other facets of our predicament in relation to God come to the fore." These facets, as Taylor notes, are networks of agape, the church as authentic communities of Christians rooted in Christ for their secular neighbors, radiating out to others, all of which resembles Martin Luther's masterpiece *The Freedom of a Christian*. According to Luther, Christians find their center in Christ and in our neighbor, in a life that paradoxically and existentially connects both the freedom of the gospel and the duty to serve others, especially the least of these. Instead of succumbing to nostalgia, Christians are compelled to patiently and persistently give themselves as Christ to our neighbors, all the while looking ahead instead of behind, praying with confidence: *maranatha*.

Endnotes

- 1 Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2011), 286. Cf. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “For one thing, all religions, and most clearly the great world faiths, are quite literally infinite. There is no end to their profundity; nor to their ramification, their variety” *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 7.
- 2 Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 286.
- 3 Joseph Goldstein, and Jack Kornfield, *The Path of Insight Meditation* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2018).
- 4 Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017), quote from front cover.
- 5 Dreher describes his move from Roman Catholicism to Orthodoxy on an episode of *Protecting Veil*, “Rod Dreher—Why Did You Become Orthodox” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WY0i8utE3XI> (Accessed on 12 September 2019).
- 6 Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 3.
- 7 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 245: “We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.”
- 8 For example, see lectures XI–XVII, “Saintliness” and “Mysticism” in William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Barnes and Nobles Classics, 2004), 230–371. Cf. Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
- 9 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).
- 10 Andrew Root, “The Challenge of Being a Pastor in a Secular Age,” *Faith and Leadership* <https://www.faithandleadership.com/andrew-root-challenge-being-pastor-secular-age> (Accessed on 12 August 2019). Cf. Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017). “The Immanent Frame” is the title of chapter 15 of Taylor’s *A Secular Age*.
- 11 Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 124–125.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 142.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 188.
- 14 For example, Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 235: “Authentic orthodox Christianity can in no way be reconciled with the zeitgeist. To the extent the church invites the technological mindset to take up residence within it, the conditions for Christianity will cease to exist.” On advocating for homeschooling, see Dreher, *Benedict Option*, 165–166.
- 15 James K. A. Smith, “The Benedict Option or the Augustinian Call: Considering Two Options for the Contemporary Church,” *Comment*, <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/the-benedict-option-or-the-augustinian-call/#> (Accessed on 12 August 2019).
- 16 Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 13, 86, 90, 104.
- 17 James K. A. Smith, “The Benedict Option or the Augustinian Call” (Accessed on 12 August 2019).
- 18 Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 66. Cf. Ivan Illich’s interview with David Cayley in: David Cayley, *Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005), 50–54.
- 19 Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catherine Misrahi, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 37.
- 20 Timothy Fry, ed., RB 1980: *The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 20–21.
- 21 1 Corinthians 13:12; 2 Corinthians 5:7.
- 22 John 16:33, 17:15.
- 23 Samuel Marinus Zwemer, *The Cross Above the Crescent: The Validity, Necessity and Urgency of Missions to Moslems* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1941), 23. (Emphasis in original.)
- 24 David B. Burrell, *Learning to Trust in Freedom: Signs from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Traditions* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2010), 30.

- 25 Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 18–19.
- 26 Hebrews 12:14; 1 Thessalonians 4:11.
- 27 Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), the title of chapter 2.
- 28 Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 246. Cf. Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 19: “If we are going to be for the world as Christ meant for us to be, we are going to have to spend more time away from the world.” Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 54: “We are only trying to build a Christian way of life that stands as an island of sanctity and stability amid the high tide of liquid modernity.” Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 242, quoting Cardinal Robert Sarah, “I am certain that the future of the Church is in the monasteries.”
- 29 Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 101–102.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 31 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), the famous conversion scene, book VIII, section 29, page 153, a direct reference to Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, paragraph-section 2, in: Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 31.
- 32 Athanasius, *Life of Antony*; Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, trans. Kevin Corrigan (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1989).
- 33 Fry, *RB* 1980, 18.
- 34 See, for example, Malcolm Barber, *The Two Cities: Medieval Europe, 1050–1320* (London: 1992), chapter six, “Monasticism and the Friars,” 141–167. Barber writes: “Despite, or perhaps because of, their secular concerns, the monasteries were very aware of their relationship with the lay world” (143).
- 35 Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 248, 258.
- 36 Matthew 28:19.
- 37 On the varieties of Marian symbolism and imagery, see: Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).
- 38 For example, there is the gothic Liebrauenkirche in Trier, Germany.
- 39 Exodus 25:16; Galatians 6:2.
- 40 Matthew 5:13–16; Fry, *RB* 1980, 17–19.
- 41 Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 106–107.
- 42 David B. Burrell, *Learning to Trust in Freedom: Signs from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Traditions* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2010), 23.
- 43 Ephesians 1:23.
- 44 Philippians 2:15.
- 45 Luke 12:33; Acts 17:17, 22.
- 46 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 532.
- 47 L’Arche International: <https://larche.org/en/web/guest/welcome> (Accessed on 17 August 2019).
- 48 Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1998), 5–6.
- 49 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 16–17.
- 50 John Starke, “Preaching to the Secular Age”, *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor*, ed. Collin Hansen (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition), 47.
- 51 Galatians 5:22–23.
- 52 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 513.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 531–532.
- 54 Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, trans. W. A. Lambert, *Luther’s Works*, AE, 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 344.
- 55 Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, AE 31, 367.

Homiletical Helps

Anatomy of a Sermon

A Sermon on Matthew 10:34–42 (Proper 8 Series A)

By Joel Okamoto

Peter Nafzger

From the editor: In the following analysis, the actual sermon by Joel Okamoto is represented in italic type, which you can read all at once by following the gray bars in the margin. Peter Nafzger's analysis is interspersed in regular type. The outer margins are set wider to provide space for taking notes. The sermon can be viewed at <https://scholar.csl.edu/cs1617/136/>

Faithful theological reflection makes proclamation of the promises of Christ inescapable. This idea, emphasized recently by Gerhard Forde, is foundational for Joel Okamoto's conception of systematic theology. As chair of the department of systematic theology, Okamoto devotes extensive attention to thinking about God, his nature, his work, and so on. He requires his students to do the same. But he also insists that talk *about* God is never an end unto itself. If it is to be faithful, systematic theology necessarily leads to and ends in first-to-second person proclamation of God's commands and promises in Christ. In other words, systematic theology and homiletics go together.

This sermon, preached by Okamoto in chapel at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis on June 28, 2017, is an instance of proclamation made inescapable by faithful systematic theology. It brings together sound biblical exegesis, faithfulness to the church's confession, focus on the promises of God, and familiarity with his hearers. Or, as we say in homiletics, it is an artful weaving of four threads of discourse: Textual Exposition, Theological Confession, Evangelical Proclamation, and Hearer Interpretation.¹ As you read this sermon, pay attention to each of these four threads.

When I prepare a sermon, I don't follow a clear, laid out approach. I just do stuff. I don't recommend doing this, and I've tried to change. But it hasn't worked yet. (I think I may give up trying.)

Whatever I do when preparing a sermon, there does come a time when I start to write out my sermon, type it out. When I do this, of course, I actually have to write or type. The first thing I usually do is type out the text—Matthew 10:34–42. Then the next thing I usually do is write out the occasion—2017 Proper 8 Series A. Then I usually stare at the screen or the piece of paper. After that, I may stall: I wander around, go on the Internet, talk to someone like my colleague in the next office, Tim Dost. But eventually I have to write something else. So, at this point, I often imagine that I am going to speak.

This is what I did for this sermon, and I started to say and to type: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father. . .”

And then it hit me. That wouldn't be right. Not with this Gospel lesson. Not with this text. Not with this Jesus, because this Jesus said: “Do not think that I came to bring peace upon the earth.”

So, if nothing else, I'm going to get the beginning right: “In the name of Jesus Christ the Lord, who said that he did not come to bring peace. Amen.”

Sermons always begin with the hearers. Whether the sermon is based on a text or a topic, the preacher always starts with his hearers in mind. They have called him to the task. They accompany him into his study. This shows itself immediately in Okamoto's sermon. He begins by describing a situation with which most of his hearers are familiar—sermon writing. While this introduction may not work as well with *every* congregation, he was preaching to a congregation of present and future preachers. This makes his introduction relatable. It also makes *him* relatable. This is no small thing for Okamoto, for some of his hearers are intimidated by him and his teaching. They likely imagine his approach to sermon composition beyond their grasp. By pulling back the curtain and revealing (with some humor) his relatively mundane starting point, Okamoto reduces the distance between himself and his hearers. This makes him and his message more accessible.

But then he catches them off guard. He describes how his usual greeting (which many of his hearers also employ) will not work for this sermon. “Not with this text. Not with this Jesus.” With these words, he signals that he will be taking this text seriously. So should they.

This raises an important issue for preaching—text selection. Many sermons are preached, as we say, “on a text.” But which text should the preacher choose? Some follow the lectionary. But even then, the preacher

must choose from at least three appointed readings. Matthew 10:34–42 is often described as a “difficult text”—the kind that sends preachers running to the Old Testament or Epistle. But consider *why* we find this text difficult. It may be that it challenges the dominant cultural conception of God. Thanks, in part, to what Christian Smith calls “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” we are culturally trained to imagine God as one who is, above all, nice. This God exists, created the world, and oversees a general moral order characterized by fairness and kindness for all. He’s not particularly involved in our lives, especially in areas we don’t want him. But, like a good therapist, he is always there to listen. His ultimate purpose is to assist us in our pursuit of happiness, success, and peace. This view of God fills the air we breathe, which makes Jesus’s words in this text uncomfortable. It would be tempting, therefore, to avoid this text altogether. But Okamoto, well aware of the cultural situation, leans into it. Which reinforces a general rule of text selection: faithful preachers do not choose texts that are easy to preach, but those that help them do right by their particular hearers.

Now, when I did this, I was on “autopilot.” You automatically write this, you write that, you say something nice at the beginning.

We’re just like that. That is just the way our minds often work. It’s automatic and effortless:

“Good morning. How are you doing?” “I’m doing fine.”

“This is the day which the Lord has made!” “Let us rejoice and be glad in it!”

“Did you turn that assignment in?” “It’s coming!”

This is just the way we seem to be wired. A lot of the time, we’re on autopilot. It’s automatic. And that is what I was on when I started to type this sermon.

But when it comes to thinking about peace, desiring peace, bringing peace, peace is more than a platitude. Peace is what people really want. They want the good things: peace, joy, contentment, blessing. If you still get emails, you will occasionally get one that not only has his or her name but also a reference to a Bible passage. Now, these passages vary, but I have never come across one that says, “Malachi 1:2–3”: “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.” You never come across the passage that I have read was one of Martin Luther’s favorite Bible passages, Psalm 116:11: “I said in my dismay, all men are liars.” We just don’t do things like that.

This is not simply because this isn’t how people automatically behave. It is because we all seem to want the good things, where there is peace and there is joy.

Here Okamoto raises an issue his students and colleagues are accustomed to hearing from him—the insufficiency of theology by platitude. Platitudes are shorthand sayings, slogans that summarize complex theological truths. They become platitudes when they have been repeated so frequently (and thoughtlessly) that they have lost their significance. The problem with platitudes is that they often terminate thought and end conversation.

Any theological shorthand can become a platitude. God is love. Law and gospel. All things work for good. Word and sacrament. Original sin. Peace for all mankind. The solution to theology by platitude is to slow down, unpack the theology behind the saying, and bring to light aspects that have been neglected.

Platitudes are particularly troublesome in sermons. This is especially the case in an increasingly post-Christian context. Seminary-trained preachers instinctively make use of compact theological phrases, implicitly assuming their hearers are familiar with the substance behind the saying. But a decrease in biblical literacy and a diminished familiarity with the church's confession have emptied many such phrases of their substance. Too often the shell alone remains. Which is why Okamoto insists that we unpack our slogans and make explicit their significance. In this case, he slows down to take a close look at our standard ways of thinking about peace and compares it to the peace we find in Jesus.

To illustrate this, I will not go straight to the Church, but to Apollo 11.

When I was growing up, I loved the idea of space travel and was enthralled by the space program. And, of course, the high point was Apollo 11, when the astronauts landed on the moon. Historically, this was one of the greatest voyages ever attempted. Symbolically, this was one of the greatest achievements ever accomplished. And you could tell that. You could tell that by the care that Neil Armstrong took in choosing the first words he would utter after setting foot on the moon: “That was one small step for a man; one giant leap for mankind.” And you could tell that because the descent stage of the lunar lander, which remained on the moon, had a plaque. Maybe you remember this. When I was a child, I got a replica of it. The plaque announces:

*HERE MEN FROM THE PLANET EARTH FIRST SET FOOT
UPON THE MOON*

JULY 1969, A. D.

WE CAME IN PEACE FOR ALL MANKIND

Of course, this was during the space race and the Cold War, and one of the signatures was from President Richard Nixon, so you might be a little cynical

about the intentions behind the plaque. But there is nothing cynical in the message. It was chosen because it was lofty, it was noble, it was sublime, it was idealistic. This is what you do when you do something truly historic. This is what you do when it isn't just a once in a lifetime but a once in a millennium event. You choose your words carefully. These are the kinds of words that represent what most of humankind thinks is most noble. "We came in peace for all mankind."

One of Okamoto's significant contributions to our theological discourse is his acute understanding of contemporary cultural thought and where it departs (and *doesn't* depart) from the Christian faith. In this sermon he explores the American ideal of peace. It would be easy to rail against the variety of ways in which we fall short of its realization or work against it through selfishness and greed. But Okamoto avoids becoming unnecessarily caustic. Instead, he affirms the sentiment and honors its nobility.

But he does not stop there. He proceeds in the next section to take his hearers by the hand and guide them toward a fully Christian conception of peace. In this way, his account of the cultural ideal is characterized by precision and fairness. This is not insignificant. Preachers are constantly tempted to create straw men and set up false targets. This is especially tempting as the culture drifts further from a Christian worldview. But this is neither honest nor effective. Observant hearers know it's not so simple. They long for more nuanced considerations that acknowledge the complexity.

But something more momentous, more significant, ultimately happened when Jesus Christ walked the earth. That was of truly eternal significance. Its implications are for ever and ever and cover all things visible and invisible. And so, if any occasion would deserve a plaque to commemorate it, it would be for Jesus Christ walking upon the earth. What might that plaque have said?

*HERE JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD, ISRAEL'S MESSIAH,
THE LORD OF THE UNIVERSE, FIRST SET FOOT UPON THE
PLANET EARTH*

The date?

A. D. 1

And the message?

I DID NOT COME TO BRING PEACE UPON THE EARTH

Those words are strange. Those words are difficult. Those words are jarring. And Jesus knew it. You can see that Jesus knew it because he did not simply assert, "I have not come to bring peace upon the earth." No, he tells the disciples, "Do not think, do not imagine, do not suppose, do not assume I have

come to bring peace upon the earth.” He knew his words were strange, difficult, jarring. Nevertheless, his message was the truth, and he said it.

Here we get to the heart of the sermon. Okamoto leads the hearers from the cultural ideal of “peace for all mankind” toward the peace of Christ that passes all understanding. He does this by highlighting Jesus’s opening words, “Do not think . . .” With these words Jesus shows that he is well aware of the disruptive nature of his message. He knows that the peace he brings will not look like it should to his hearers. By attending to the details of the text, Okamoto lets the Scriptures shape (and correct) our conception of Jesus and his mission.

Now, the fact that he did not bring peace upon the earth, but rather a sword, that when he came there would be division and dissention, that in homes fathers and sons would turn against each other, and also mothers and daughters, that one’s enemies would be in one’s own household, that there would not be peace but discord, this was not the purpose for which Jesus came. This would be the result. Jesus knew that. Jesus was already experiencing that.

You should keep in mind that Jesus is saying this when he is calling and sending out the apostles. He was telling them to go and do what he was doing. He told them to proclaim that the reign of the heavens was at hand. He gave them authority to cast out demons, to cleanse lepers, to heal diseases. But Jesus does not only send them out with this message and this authority. He also cautions them about what they would face. Yes, some would receive them, but others would not. They would be beaten in the synagogues. They would be dragged into court. They would be brought to testify before the ruling authorities. There would be trouble. There would be pain. There would be persecution. This was going to happen to Jesus, and the disciple is not above the master. So Jesus was warning them: “You should expect this.” This would be the result.

Notice the important distinction Okamoto makes in these paragraphs. The lack of peace was not the *purpose*, but the *result* of Jesus’s mission. This distinction reflects a thoroughly worked out systematic understanding of God and his dealing with the world. And it makes this sermon work. It enables Okamoto to proclaim a Christian understanding of peace, which makes space for and takes place in the midst of worldly violence against God and his people.

Standing behind this distinction are such concepts as the will of God, the fallen nature of creation, the humiliation of Jesus, the question of why some are saved and not others, and the nature of Christian living as cross

bearing. In a congregational setting, I can imagine preaching a series of sermons that would examine a number of these issues related to a Christian understanding of peace. Perhaps I'd call the series something like "Strange Peace."

For *this* sermon, the distinction sets the stage for a rehearsal of Jesus's death and resurrection. In this way Okamoto locates Jesus's teaching in this text within the larger Christian story of everything.

Jesus came to announce and to establish the reign of God over all things. In a world where there were sin and evil, darkness and misdeed, confusion and pain, violence and death, God was going to do something about them. God was going to do something for ever and ever. That is why he sent Jesus. It would be the end of the world. It would be the end of the way that things are. For some, this was good news. For others, this was bad news. And so some believed in Jesus and followed him, but others rejected Jesus. And the same would happen, Jesus was warning, to those he was sending out in his name and with his authority.

What happened to Jesus? It was just as he knew. There were those who rejected him, and so he was crucified. He died as the "King of the Jews." He died with people taunting him, because he claimed to be the Son of God.

But God raised him from the dead.

When Jesus was sending out the apostles here, he told them to go the lost sheep of the house of Israel. "Don't go to the Gentiles. Don't go to the Samaritans. Let's stay here with God's chosen people." But after Jesus rose from the dead, he commanded them to make disciples of all nations. And that is what they did. And that is what the people of God have been doing ever since. And that is why and how you are here.

In his proclamation of the gospel, Okamoto grounds the work of Jesus in the larger biblical narrative. This is a helpful way to address the contemporary decrease in biblical literacy. Not every sermon needs to rehearse the whole story every week. But the intentional preacher keeps in mind that the preaching helps shape the hearers' view of the big picture. Brief and broad summaries, like this one, can be helpful to that end.

Okamoto's summary follows the four Gospels and the apostolic preaching in Acts. He identifies Jesus as the one sent by the Father to reclaim and restore his creation. He casts Jesus's death as a rejection of the peace Jesus came to establish. He portrays the resurrection as God's vindication of Jesus and his mission. He reminds the hearers that they were in chapel that day only because of the universal scope of the church's mission and the extension of the gospel to all nations.

After describing the death and resurrection of Jesus in this way, Okamoto is now ready to recast our conception of peace in fully Christian terms. He does this by emphasizing the eschatological nature of this peace. He directs his hearers toward the promised return of Jesus and the eternal peace God has promised for all his people on that day. The result is a notion of peace that is not characterized by freedom from suffering. It is peace that expects suffering, and responds to suffering with repentant faith.

The purpose for which Christ originally came upon the earth has not yet been accomplished. So the message still is: "The reign of the heavens is at hand." So the message still is: "Repent. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Keep all that he has commanded."

And the result sometimes still is: trouble. So what Jesus said to his apostles, I, in the name of Jesus, say to you: Do not think, do not suppose, do not imagine, do not assume that there will be peace on earth. There will be trouble. Perhaps some of you have already experienced this in your own lives. There will be trouble. Confusion. Pain. Even persecution.

In case you need me to explain—this is not good news.

No, the good news is this: Everyone who endures to the end will be saved. Jesus endured in his message and his mission. Yes, he was crucified, but God raised him from the dead. And what God did for Jesus he will do for all who believe in Jesus. That is what he will do for you. When Jesus first came into the world, there was not peace. But when Jesus comes again, there will be peace forevermore in his name and under his rule and for all of his followers—for you.

Recall the first sentence I wrote in this *Anatomy*. "Faithful theological reflection makes proclamation of the promises of Christ inescapable." After taking seriously Jesus's words about the violence he (and his people) would suffer in this life, the only move left for the preacher is first-to-second person proclamation of the promise. There is no proof of this peace today. Glimpses, perhaps. And we are grateful for these glimpses. But they are always only partial. The fullness is still coming and can only be promised. In this way, proclamation has been made inescapable. Okamoto steps up to the plate and speaks the promises of God as a servant of the word directly to his hearers. This promise of peace is grounded in Jesus's resurrection from the dead, and it will come to us when he raises us on the day of his return.

So then, do not think there will be peace now. I am not promising you personally there will be trouble. But do not be surprised; don't be caught unawares. But I promise you, in the name of Jesus, the Son of God, who is

coming back: there will be peace and joy and blessing and satisfaction and contentment and life and wholeness for all of you—all of you who call upon Jesus as the Lord, all of you who trust him and his promises—there will be peace for you.

May God through his Spirit keep you in that promise and in his grace.

Because “peace for all mankind” will never be fully realized in a world that remains marred by sin, Okamoto concludes the sermon with nothing other than the promise of God in Christ. But the promise is enough. Indeed, it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. That’s what the sermon aims to do. It gives the hearers a promise to believe, and in doing so it prepares the hearers to endure difficulties by faith.

1 These four threads come from an article by David Schmitt to help preachers evaluate their own preaching. See “The Tapestry of Preaching” *Concordia Journal* 37, no. 2 (2011).

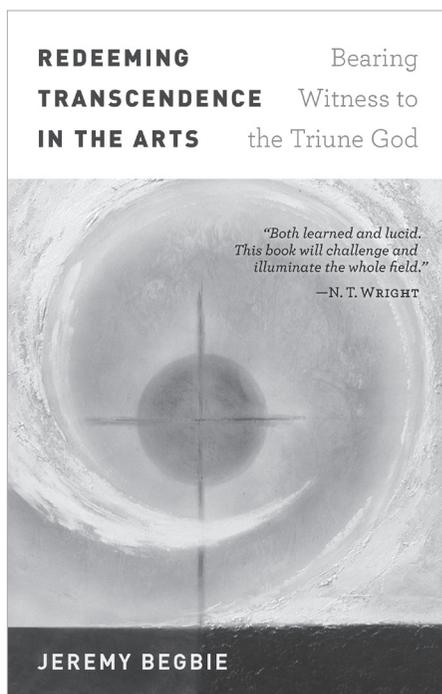
Reviews

**REDEEMING TRANSCENDENCE
IN THE ARTS: *Bearing Witness to
the Triune God.*** By Jeremy Begbie.
*Eerdmans, 2018. Paper. 212 pages.
\$18.00.*

Some books are definitive for their topic and others are exploratory, inviting scholars to pursue lines of thought that will bring both discovery and clarification to a field. Jeremy Begbie's *Redeeming Transcendence* is definitely an exploratory book.

In this work, Begbie seeks to revitalize Christian engagement in conversations about the intersection of theology and the arts. As professor of theology at Duke Divinity School, director of the Duke Initiatives in Theology and the Arts, and an accomplished musician, Begbie writes from a profitable intersection of theological acumen and artistic sensitivity.

Begbie's work follows a helpful dialogical pattern. He begins by listening to how Christians use the language of transcendence as they discuss theology and the arts; then, he turns his attention to the Scriptures to hear how God has equipped the church to contribute to this conversation; and, finally, he closes by offering a series of examples wherein



the church can speak into conversations about the arts, bringing its specific witness of the Triune God in a way that redeems discussions of transcendence in the arts.

In the first two chapters, as Begbie listens to conversations about theology and the arts, he focuses his attention upon the elusive language of "transcendence" and the "sublime." He offers a general survey of specific scholars and artists, situates their arguments

Editor's note

This featured review by David Schmitt of Jeremy Begbie's significant work serves as a kind of introduction to some of the issues which will be further explored at this year's Theological Symposium (Sept. 22-23) centered in the theme "Whatever is Lovely...: The Role of Beauty in Theology and Ministry."

through careful footnotes, and creates a helpful balance of the literary, visual, and musical arts. In this general overview, Begbie notes the following points of agreement in references to the “transcendent”: the arts give people the sense of divine transcendence; this sensibility is best cultivated in the absence of explicitly religious content; the transcendent experience affirms God’s presence in the world apart from the ways in which God is normally recognized by religious traditions; and, because of this, the arts offer a way for the church to interact with a culture that is skeptical and increasingly disillusioned, if not downright hostile, to the faith.

As Begbie reflects upon the contours of this conversation, he notes how this discussion often assumes that divine transcendence is discovered from an interaction with our limits (rather than an interaction with the divine), how it works with a generalized or generalizable deity (rather than the God revealed in Jesus Christ and attested to by scriptural witness), how humans are assumed to be able to perceive and respond to experiences of transcendence (rather than needing to repentant and be changed for such an experience), and how the divinity expressed is often of a unitarian (not Trinitarian) nature.

In the third chapter, as Begbie turns to Scripture, he meditates upon the Gospel of John and allows the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ to serve as the source for a renewed understanding of the transcendent.

Rather than base our understanding of the transcendent upon the limits of our experience, Begbie articulates a Christian understanding of the transcendent based on the revelation of Jesus Christ. In particular, Begbie highlights how the Trinitarian relationship articulated in John offers a pattern for how Christians might speak about God in reference to “otherness” and “uncontainability,” both qualities that typify discussions of the “transcendent.”

In terms of “otherness,” the Christian faith confesses God’s otherness as a dynamic otherness that is “to and for the world” (131). Rather than see God’s otherness through the lens of our limits wherein transcendence is often distanced or detached, we begin to see God’s transcendence as “characterized by a loving commitment to the integrity and fullness of the other” (130). In terms of “uncontainability,” Begbie argues that the Christian faith confesses God’s uncontainability as an “outward movement of self-sharing for the sake of the other” (155). Rather than see God’s uncontainability through the lens of the created order (wherein the transcendent is an abstraction from our limits (e.g., eternal rather than contained in time and infinite rather than contained in space), we begin to see God’s uncontainability as characterized by his faithful creative acting out of covenant love.

In the fourth chapter, Begbie then explores the implications of his work with the Scriptures. He returns to the earlier conversation about the transcendent and demonstrates with

concrete examples the way in which bearing witness to the Triune God shapes our conversations about the transcendent in the arts. Here, his work is the most fascinating and, unfortunately, due to space, the most limited. The examples he does offer, however, tangibly show the way in which Christian conversation about the “transcendent” in the arts is revitalized by a meditation upon the Scriptures and what we, as Christian, have been given to say.

Because the book is exploratory and not definitive, Begbie offers scholars a quick glance at the impoverished way in which the church engages in conversations about theology and the arts and a sound and invigorating way forward for future conversations. His work, therefore, opens up avenues for future scholarship and, while not definitive, will serve as the starting point for richer and robust conversations that engage scriptural witness and the world in conversations about theology and the arts.

David Schmitt

**JOHANN GERHARD (1582–1637)
AND THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF
THEOLOGIA AT THE THRESHOLD
OF THE “AGE OF ORTHODOXY”:
The Making of the Theologian.**

*By Glenn K. Fluegge. Edition Ruprecht,
2018. Hardcover. 257 pages. \$48.00.*

What is theology? What makes a theologian? What do these questions mean for our understanding of personal

faith and Christian life as they relate to the practice of theological education? In *Johann Gerhard (1582–1637) and the Conceptualization of Theologia at the Threshold of the “Age of Orthodoxy”* Glenn Fluegge investigates these questions in the light of history, offering keen insights for meeting the challenges of the present and the future. Fluegge is a professor of theology at Concordia University Irvine. The work is a revised version of his doctoral dissertation submitted to the theology faculty of the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Fluegge’s supervisor, Werner Klän, also on the faculty of the Lutherische Theologische Hochschule in Oberursel, Germany, has appended a German summary of the book. Robert Kolb contributed the foreword.

Fluegge’s study focuses on the work of Johann Gerhard, university professor of theology, ecclesiastical superintendent, and leading theologian of the Lutheran “Age of Orthodoxy.” While seeking to follow the teachings of Martin Luther, Gerhard utilized a methodology derived from Aristotelian philosophy as a framework for systematizing Christian doctrine. The goal was to exposit faithfully the teachings of the Bible in a way that promised a secure defense of Lutheran teaching against opposing views. Applying this disciplined approach, however, Gerhard quickly faced a basic, initial question: What is theology? Following close on its heels were questions about the faith and life of the individual Christian and its connection to the theological

task. While equipped with a new method, Gerhard was not operating in an academic vacuum. He was a pastor called to preach and teach the word of God—in the lecture hall, to be sure—but also to believers in the congregation, people living lives in faith. The practical purpose of theology was part of the reason for attaining theological knowledge. The project was about training faithful preachers and teachers, but also about cultivating personal piety as well as pastoral care for parishioners.

Fluegge introduces readers to Gerhard's thinking about what theology is, and the reasons for it. Gerhard had inherited from the Wittenbergers an understanding of theology as a *habitus*, or disposition, necessary for the pastoral ministry. Originating as an Aristotelian concept, the humanist Melanchthon had reframed the idea of *habitus* in his textbook on logic following Aristotle's categories for the purpose of describing the development of human virtues. Not merely concerned with moral and intellectual qualities, Melanchthon added knowledge and faith (including trust) to the virtues of a Christian with the result that the *habitus* was viewed as carrying out activities with deliberation in a particular context. As Fluegge explains, Gerhard advanced this definition to qualify theology as a *habitus* (θεόδοτος) which is mostly practical. The term was not Gerhard's invention—Balthasar Meisner and others had been using it for a while—and Gerhard's contributions were part of the greater conversation going on at

the time. This expression, theology as a “God-given *habitus*,” which Gerhard differentiates from Aristotle's concept of *habitus* derived from intellectual conditions, becomes “a mainstay in Protestant, and especially Lutheran, definitions of *theologia* throughout the period of Orthodoxy” (87).

In the *Prooemium* to his *Loci Theologici*, Gerhard formulated his concept of *theologia* in a way that reinforced what he believed to be most necessary for an understanding faithful to the Scriptures. *Theologia*, first of all, is doctrine, “built up from the Word of God, by which people are instructed in true faith and pious living for eternal life” (147). At the same time, theology also is “a God-given *habitus* conferred on a person by the Holy Spirit through the Word” (147). In this manner and by the *habitus*, a person is instructed in God's word so that both the mind is illuminated and the heart moved to a life of good works. Along the way, the person is prepared and equipped to tell others the way of salvation and the true teachings of God's word so that they too may be led into the Christian faith and life. While the aim of theology as a *habitus* is not simple knowledge, but action, its ultimate end is the glorification of God.

With this formulation of *theologia* as a practical *habitus*, Gerhard was seeking to preserve the insights of Luther and other Wittenberg reformers of the sixteenth century within the changing context of his own seventeenth century. Gerhard clarified the relationship

between professional theological practice and the personal practice of faith. The ability to preach, teach, refute error, and exercise pastoral care are important and not to be dismissed—they are part of the theological habitus. But they grow from the formation of personal faith and the practice of that faith in the Christian life. In the development of the theologian, “professional *praxis* is founded on personal faith-*praxis*” (231). This is key to Gerhard’s qualification of theology as “practical.”

Through his analysis of Gerhard’s writings on the nature of theology, Fluegge reveals the uniqueness of Gerhard’s understanding, and demonstrates that it has much to offer today. While theology is an academic discipline needed for carrying out the work of pastoral ministry, Fluegge reminds us that faith in Christ and life in him are the foundation. The theological task starts by hearing and learning the word of God; the Holy Spirit works faith and that faith is then believing and working. Professional practice of the ministry arises from personal faith and practice of that faith. Fluegge’s book is an excellent contribution not only to the study of Lutheranism in the era of Orthodoxy, but a welcome addition to the ongoing conversation about theological education in a variety of contexts. Thinking with Gerhard about the intellectual and spiritual formation of theology students, as well as their work as pastors, has meaning beyond Lutheran contexts and can bring benefit to the entire Christian community.

Gerhard Bode

MUTUAL HIERARCHY: A New Approach to Social Trinitarianism.

By Jeffrey A. Dukeman. Wipf & Stock, 2019. Paper. 224 pages. \$27.00.

Dukeman points out that a major trajectory in modern discourse concerning the biblical doctrine of the Trinity is the assertion that the “chief ontological category for trinitarian discourse” is the notion of community. Indeed, any notion of community for Social Trinitarians is predicated upon the seminal community of the divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But this immediately raises the question: Of what kind of community do Social Trinitarians speak of when they posit “community” as the chief ontological category for God? Implicit in such an assertion is an analogy. An analogy from human community to the triune God existing as divine community with a reverse-analogical move back to humanity, that is, divine community as an exemplar for human community. If this trajectory sounds circular, it is; and I think that Dukeman points out this very thing with respect to the chief thinkers within Social Trinitarianism. Hans Urs von Balthasar, a now-deceased Roman Catholic theologian, and Miroslav Volf, an egalitarian social Trinitarian within the “free church” tradition, advocate the hierarchical and egalitarian views, respectively (forming what Dukeman calls the *hierarchy-equality polarity or tension*), as an entrée to positing his own understanding of the triune God as community: Mutual Hierarchy.

Thus, Mutual Hierarchy, for Dukeman, is a *biblical* model that seeks to occupy that creative space of tension between the two poles of hierarchy and egalitarianism with respect to understanding divine community. It seeks to preserve biblical notions of the “uniqueness” and “dignity” of each of the divine persons (a chief concern for Dukeman throughout his book), which the hierarchical and egalitarian views tend to erode around the environs of the poles. The hierarchical pole tends to erode dignity while unduly preserving uniqueness while the egalitarian pole tends to erode uniqueness while unduly preserving dignity. Dukeman is a careful theologian though, who respects the work of his Social Trinitarian forebears. He acknowledges that his critique of them is really a function of their prior critique of more ancient models of the Trinity (the Eastern model with its emphasis on “personhood” and the Western model’s emphasis on “substance”); models that by and large had failed to take into account the relationships that the divine persons had amongst one another *ad intra* (in relation to the “Immanent Trinity”) or their relationships among one another *ad extra* with respect to the mutuality of their roles in the creation, redemption, and restoration (sanctification) of the fallen world (or the “Economic Trinity”). Social Trinitarians had discerned that “personhood” and/or “substance” as a chief ontological assertion of God’s being did not adequately account for the biblical data concerning God’s

community within God’s self and how God as community acted in the time and space of creation for redemption and restoration (see John 17), while preserving the dignity and uniqueness of each of the divine persons. Also, within the field of Trinitarian talk, Dukeman states his adherence to Karl Rahner’s axiom that the: “economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity,” while adding that this “must not be interpreted to mean that the immanent Trinity is somehow reducible to the economic Trinity” (xvii).

Dukeman, in chapter 1, introduces the reader to the on-going and substantial conversation within Social Trinitarianism already in progress. After discussing the primary arguments of the ancient “person” and “substance” oriented models of Trinity, he then introduces us to Balthasar and Volf, chief Social Trinitarians that set-up the hierarchy-equality polarity that Dukeman will critique.

In chapter 2, having posited the existing polarity between Balthasar and Volf, he then critiques how these do not adequately preserve notions of dignity and uniqueness among the divine persons, while his Mutual Hierarchy model accomplishes precisely that.

In chapter 3, Dukeman applies the Mutual Hierarchy model to the Economic Trinity (while critiquing Balthasar’s and Volf’s application), namely his notion of *differentiated kenotic vocations*, a brilliant concept which perceives that each of the divine

persons limited (or emptied) themselves of certain inherent prerogatives according to the dignity and uniqueness of each divine person for purposes of accomplishing the Triune God's salvific work in/of creation.

Chapter 4 takes up the Immanent Trinity (while critiquing Balthasar's and Volf's application), and how Mutual Hierarchy involves the idea of *mutual constitution* of the divine persons in their eternal association with one another, for instance, what is appropriate to the Father is *already* appropriately (and eternally) related to the Son and vice versa in their mutual constitution of each other, while preserving the dignity and uniqueness of each.

Chapter 5 addresses the implications of Mutual Hierarchy for purposes of ecclesiology (using the Gospel of John), noting among other things, how Balthasar's hierarchical model tends to aggrandize the clergy over the laity while Volf's egalitarian model tends toward the opposite (or, perhaps, even dissolving any notion of clergy altogether). Mutual Hierarchy would involve the preservation of dignity and uniqueness between clergy and laity (as, by analogy, these two concerns are preserved within

the community of the Trinity).

Chapters 6 and 7 apply Mutual Hierarchy to the field of hermeneutics and several practical theological implications using the Gospel of Matthew, and the tri-partite discernment of Christ's vocation as king, prophet, and priest (i.e., the Matthean Triadic Macrostructure corresponding to the being and work of the Trinity manifested in the life of Jesus).

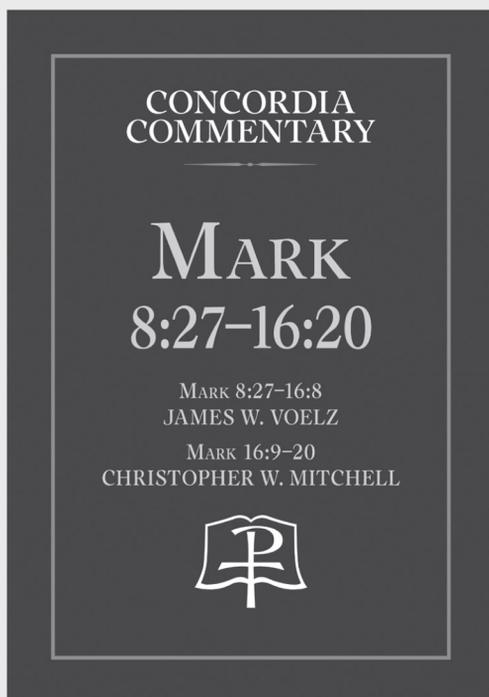
Between the Balthasarian (Roman Catholic) and Volfian ("free church") poles, Dukeman stakes out a view that is eminently biblical (e.g., his extensive use of the Johannine and Matthean Gospels as a basis for Mutual Hierarchy), and thereby avoids the specter of ideology/tradition rendering Social Trinitarianism as merely circular, that is, a projection onto the Triune God of our own notions of (ideal) community and then back to the communities that we exist within (or hope to exist within). In that vein, Dukeman succeeds in his objective: "to put many of the current claims made by prominent Social Trinitarians on firmer doctrinal ground" (xvii).

*Christopher Chandler
Immanuel Lutheran Church
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