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# concordia journal



*On the cover: the sanctuary of the Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus on the campus of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis (photo: Erica Tape).*

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# *Editorials*



# Editor's Note . . .

## In the Time of COVID-19

As you can see on the cover, the Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus sits empty and quiet, like so many sanctuaries these days. Much has changed during this novel coronavirus pandemic. Some of those changes are temporary. But some of them will be permanent.

We obviously planned the content for this issue of the *Concordia Journal* well before COVID-19 became a daily reality. And as this daily reality seems to change with each passing day, we thought long and hard about what to do with it. At a time when churches and their workers are scrambling to maintain online worship and ongoing ministry, will anybody even notice? Will it come off as “tone-deaf”? Is there something else we should be doing instead?

The implicit theme of this issue of the *Concordia Journal* was to be stewardship. The articles by Joel Biermann and David Peter were first commissioned by Concordia Seminary's Center for Stewardship, at the time under the direction of Wayne Knolhoff. When Dr. Knolhoff retired, the Center's resources were more-or-less buried. This was to be our chance to unearth some of their treasures. We planned to accompany them with an article Charles Arand first wrote for one of the *festschriften* that honored Norman Nagel. It seemed to us an apt combination, because if faith finds its beginning and end in the generosity of God, we would, as Martin Luther alluded, be left with nothing but *wonder*. The issue was then to close with a reflection by the indomitable “Rev” Francis Rossow on the theme of death in C. S. Lewis's *The Last Battle*, the last book in his Chronicles of Narnia.

The more we talked about it, the more we came to realize that even as the whole world has been turned upside down by a pandemic on a scale none of us has ever seen, perhaps it is still important to remember that our churches, and those called to work in and through them, are stewards of the mysteries of God—especially now—partakers in the ministry of grace and blessing that abounds all the more in the midst of disease and death.

Like so many sanctuaries, the Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus is empty. But look again. As you can see in the scaffolding, something new is happening too. I know that most churches are not installing new stained-glass windows these days, and stained-glass windows are perhaps the furthest thing from your mind. But let them stand in as a symbol. Even when our sanctuaries are empty, God is at work, doing something new. As I've looked through social media, I've been astounded in countless posts and links and videos by the ingenuity and creativity of pastors and

church workers stewarding ministries in new forms, all centered in the gospel. And as I look out the window of my makeshift home office, the dogwood trees are just beginning to bloom, tiny green orbs veined white with blossoms about to burst forth. Death is all around us. But now the green blade rises . . . and Love lives again.

There is still reason to wonder in this world.

*Travis J. Scholl*  
*Managing Editor of Theological Publications*

# No Social Distancing from Jesus!

*If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it. (1 Cor 3:12)*

**O**ur Lord's church takes institutional forms. You and I are temporary stewards of the institutions to which we have been called, be that your congregation, our seminaries, universities, or other institutions within the family of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Paul is speaking directly to you and me. How we have built in the past, how we respond in this time of crisis, and how we build after the coronavirus pandemic has passed will be revealed on the day of judgment. As unwelcome as this terrifying pandemic is, it refines our assumptions and challenges us as we go about the church's institutional present and future.

The media is filled with prognosticators telling us what life will be like on the other side of COVID-19. Greater expenditures for scientific research, more distance learning and virtual meetings, new expressions of community, and economic recession or even depression may well be in our future. Since the Creator has placed us in this context and not another, we don't know how our church institutions will come out on the other side of COVID-19. Certainly many previous ways of pursuing the Lord's mission will be changed. Streaming worship and Bible classes will be normal. Some congregations will not have the financial wherewithal to continue. Others who refused to enter dual- or triple-parish agreements may have a change of heart. Congregations with bigger budgets and bigger numbers will be shaken as well. Here at Concordia Seminary, we've been blessed in countless ways and will withstand the shock, but we already know that things will be different later this year and for years to come. Who knows? God only knows.

The question is how we will build in the future. While we know precious little about what is to come, the little we know is precious. Jesus Christ is the foundation upon whom we will build in the future. "For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 3:11). Paul makes clear that the content and congregating of the Corinthians is to be Christ-centered. A constant theme of our leadership within our institutions should be that we are different from other organizations and gatherings in our communities. We don't see our congregations as voluntary gatherings merely for the social good. Ours is not a place of dispassionate lectures and discussion on theology and moral living. We're not cheap

counseling centers for more satisfied lifestyles. If we judge the church's content and congregating by the expertise and standards of the prevailing culture around us, we will come up short. "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Cor 1:26). As leaders of the institutional church our foundational theme is that we are to be qualitatively different from any other organization and value system in society. "Because of him (God) you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'" (1 Cor 1:30–31). In these days of forced withdrawal to try and stay alive, there is no social distancing from Jesus Christ.

One mercy these days is that you and I are driven to the Scriptures to learn and share truths that help us understand these times. I appreciate so much Thomas Long's point that you and I go to the Scriptures on behalf of the people.<sup>1</sup> While we learned enough theology at the Seminary to be certified for ministry, we're going into our studies now with as much, hopefully greater, urgency than ever. Why is this happening? COVID-19 is surely the brokenness of our sinful world, but if sin is forgiven why does God allow this? Where is God, if there is a God? "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (Jn 11:21). About these questions, we thank the Spirit for the treasures of Lutheran theology. Our theological heritage for this time of crisis is that God remains mysteriously hidden but has revealed himself to us in the suffering Christ. Our wisdom is markedly different from the world's wisdom. "We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory" (1 Cor 2:7; cf. 1 Pt 1:20). To cope with the coronavirus, scientific, medical, and governmental mobilizations seek wisdom, and rightly so, this being the purpose of ministerial reason. It is also understandable—even if badly mistaken and wrong—that people project those criteria upon the Creator, for this is how the "natural person" thinks (1 Cor 2:14), and by that standard God is doing nothing, if he even exists. The pandemic reminds us that the content of our wisdom and the reason for our congregating is totally different. "The natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). In this crisis the Creator remains mysteriously hidden ("No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God," 1 Cor 2:11) but he continues to reveal himself in in the Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ. "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this not in words taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual" (1 Cor 12:12–13). "For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6).

**This is the "theology of the cross,"** our Lutheran heritage so helpful and needed

in these times. In his Heidelberg Disputation of April, 1518, Martin Luther listed some of God's unattractive works: punishment, humbling, frightening, foolishness, sorrow, despair, death.<sup>2</sup> That's now! We're experiencing God's "alien" work which would grind even Christians into despair, were it not for the gospel. "It is certain that one must utterly despair of oneself in order to be made fit to receive the grace of Christ."<sup>3</sup> Gerhard Forde explains in his book *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, "When all our human possibilities have been exhausted and we have been reduced to nothing, the one who creates out of nothing does his 'proper work.'"<sup>4</sup> The theologian of the cross "understands the visible and the 'back side' of God seen through suffering and the cross."<sup>5</sup> The theology of the cross is not simply pointing to the cross and saying, "Jesus died for our sins." Because he indeed went to suffering, the Spirit seeks to give us a mindset that sees Jesus's redemptive presence in societal suffering and evil, just as the Good Samaritan went to the man who fell among thieves. This is the hidden God who now manifests himself through the mercies of Jesus Christ and his disciples to the suffering. "It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" (1 Cor 1:21). "Because while Christ lives in us through faith, he now moves us to do good works through that living faith in his works. For the works that he does are for us the fulfillment, given through faith, of God's commands. When we look at them, we are moved to imitate them."<sup>6</sup>

**When you are building something, you look forward.** Anniversaries celebrate the past ("Our sanctuary was built one hundred years ago") but builders are always looking forward to their project's completion. Paul repeatedly points his hearers and us forward to "when the perfect comes" (1 Cor 13:10), to the coming return of Christ. "You are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1:7-8). "Guiltless" is God's gift to us of justification by grace alone. "Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling."<sup>7</sup> But Paul's forward look also involves sanctification, how wisely you and I are building on the foundation of the crucified one as we steward the institutions of Christ's church. "Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done" (1 Cor 3:12-13). When we get to the other side of COVID-19, our post-action reviews will show what we did well and where we failed, where we were prepared and where we were not. Had we through our preaching, teaching, and visitation (socially distanced, of course!) instilled confidence in the goodness of our heavenly Father so that they weathered the storm and witnessed to others the hope that is in us (1 Pt 3:15)? Were we prepared as a congregation and Seminary to use today's media tools for content and congregating despite social distancing? We posted and streamed; did we also make personal contact through telephone and email? Has the institution we lead been prepared financially for the

lean years (Gn 41:27)? Anticipating the last day's postmortem of our stewardship is a mixed bag, understandably so since we are still *simul iustus et peccator*. "If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire" (1 Cor 3:14–15). Luther described our imperfect stewardship this way: "There is a comparison: If someone cuts with a rusty and rough hatchet, even though the worker is a good craftsman, the hatchet leaves bad, jagged, and ugly gashes. So it is when God works through us, etc."<sup>8</sup> But when the last day's postmortem does come, we will plead Jesus's sufferings and merit and we will be saved. "He himself will be saved." "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9).

As I come near the end of over fifteen years as president of Concordia Seminary, I am humbled and profoundly thankful. Early on I envisioned my tenure as transitional, a twentieth-century seminary moving into the new challenges of the twenty-first century. Through unwelcome crises, the Great Recession of 2008–2009 and now COVID-19, the mysterious God continues to move us forward through his mercies in Jesus Christ to the final completion of his saving project. I thank all who have encouraged and blessed the work of this mission, my co-workers, our alumni, and all who in various ways have supported and shared our Lord's good news through Concordia Seminary. My heartfelt love continues for Diane, who has given her all these fifteen plus years to campus and community, and for our daughters Elizabeth and Catharine who have always shared insights from their perspectives on church and country. "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Cor 1:31) and I do, though most inadequately. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his own time of crisis, "May God in His mercy lead us through these times; but above all, may He lead us to Himself."<sup>9</sup> It is enough now for us to know and cling to Jesus. "All things are yours . . . and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (1 Cor 3:23).

Dale A. Meyer  
President

## Endnotes

- 1 See Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 58–59.
- 2 Heidelberg Disputation, proof to thesis 4.
- 3 *Ibid.*, thesis 18.
- 4 Heidelberg Disputation, proof to thesis 4.
- 5 Heidelberg Disputation, thesis 20; cf. Exodus 33:23.
- 6 *Ibid.*, proof to thesis 27.
- 7 Lutheran Service Book, 761, 3.
- 8 Heidelberg Disputation, thesis 6.
- 9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 370.

# Pandemic, Coping with It

This is not the time or place to rehearse the life-changing and, in some cases, devastating effects COVID-19 has been having on people's lives near and far—in our families, churches, communities, workplaces, and neighbors around the nation and world. But how do Christians cope with this pandemic? Here is some food for thought.

## ***A Time to Repent***

The Christian life is one of daily repentance. The baptized are called to die with Christ in order to be raised with him to new life. This is especially true in the season of Lent. When we hear of and see great numbers of people suffering and dying around us, the primary response is grief. Grief is our form of death at this time. It is deep contrition over the inescapable and universal reality that, as heirs of Adam, we are dust and to dust we shall return. Pandemics increase exponentially our awareness of this tragic state of affairs. Repentance calls us not to avoid this reality, but to make room for grieving it. This is not fatalism which panics, despairs, and gives up at the sight of death. Christians grieve, but not without hope. Lent points us to Easter, death to resurrection. As heirs of God's promises of new life in Christ, the last Adam, we are called even in the worst times to hope in God's deliverance from the power of sin and death. This hope against all hope is a bold confidence in God's promises, and it is most needed at a time when tragic news fills the air and tragedy itself threatens to squelch our spirits. In these painful times, set time aside for confession and absolution, for contrition and forgiveness, for sorrow in view of hope.

## ***A Time for Vigilance***

The Christian life is not an easy one. It is a perilous journey in the desert, in the wilderness, where the devil attacks and tempts God's children. Times of crisis especially make us aware of our vulnerabilities to such assaults. So we must be vigilant, watchful. Temptations can make the fatalist, who despairs over tragedy, doubt God's promises of protection, provision, and life. But the enemy can just as easily tempt the perfectionist, who is overly confident in his own health, resources, and power, to ignore or minimize

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### ***Editor's note***

*This essay first appeared at [www.concordiatheology.org](http://www.concordiatheology.org).*

the present trial. Bold confidence in God's promises is about faith in Christ and his words of life. It is not the same as a triumphalist view of things, which in the name of self-confidence makes light of or flirts with danger. In these times of temptation, however, Christians are also reminded that the wilderness is the place of God's presence, the place of testing where he refines us to be resilient and stand firm in his promises when times are tough. We are in the desert, but not alone. God's Spirit accompanies and leads us. This is the time to be neither a spiritual Debbie-Downer nor a spiritual Superman. It is a time for seeing God alone as our oasis in the desert, to grow in our dependence on his mercies through prayer and the word. In these times of temptation and testing, set time aside to call upon the Spirit in prayer for protection from all assaults of the devil and for guidance and strength in the word.

### ***A Time for Sacrifice***

The Christian life is one of conformity to Christ in his sacrifice, in his self-giving to others even unto death. Times of suffering put into question the popular notion that being a Christian is about being happy and prosperous. It is really about joyfully sacrificing for others. In unprecedented times, sacrifice may take different forms. Some serve ailing patients on the front lines, at times at the risk of their own personal health. Many are learning that, in times of pandemics, sacrifice, oddly enough, can also mean staying home and keeping a safe distance from neighbors so as not to put them in harm's way. This is not the time to claim some individualistic version of freedom without concern for others, but rather a time to learn anew that Christian freedom is ultimately freedom for the sake of others. In times of crisis, we die to self in order to make room for the neediest neighbors in our midst. We learn to put on the form of the servant, and put ahead the interests of others before ours. But let us also remember that pandemics make us all vulnerable, not only physically, but also emotionally and spiritually. For this reason, it is honest to think of ourselves as a communion of both givers and receivers of divine generosity. Through our unity in Christ, we are in communion with one another and thus share each other's burdens and joys. What joys can you share with others at this time? Perhaps it is the joy of having meals together as a family. Perhaps it is the joy of making meals available to an elderly member of the congregation. What burdens can others lift from you nowadays? Perhaps a phone call to check in on you, to help you deal with the anxiety of family members traveling or not yet reunited. Or maybe a word of encouragement from people who know how hard you are working to continue to care for people in new ways, even if mostly online. In times of isolation, finding ways of sharing life together with patience and grace is more important than ever.

### ***A Time for Hospitality***

The Christian life is one of welcoming strangers into our lives, even when the

welcome is not physically possible. Pandemics make us painfully aware of large numbers of suffering neighbors we were unaware of before. Hearing of many lives lost in places that seem so far away, like China and Italy, we suddenly realize how much we share with these strangers. At times like these, we put a human face on strangers, especially those who are most vulnerable to the virus. We think of the elderly, the homeless, refugees and asylum seekers, the poor, and now also record numbers of underemployed and unemployed neighbors. What can the church do to practice and embody hospitality toward strangers at this time? Some are ordering in from restaurants, giving baristas additional tips, sending donations to relief and humanitarian agencies. In times of financial distress and economic uncertainty and fear, the default mode is to play it safe and focus on those closest to us. This makes sense and is prudent, and yet the church is also called to exercise a hospitable disposition toward those who are not as close to us, but still require our prayers and love. In these inhospitable times, let us not give up on extending our love for our closest neighbors beyond the confines of the familiar.

### ***A Time for Devotion***

The Christian life is one of devotion to God in good and bad times. We were created to embody devotion to our Creator in the rhythm of repose and movement, of rest and labor. There are gardens to labor in, to tend to and care for, as stewards of God's gifts. God continues to provide for his world through many laborers who are doing their best to care for lives on earth. People are busy figuring out the next step. In the midst of daily updates, difficult news, and uncertainty about the future, our minds are also filled with fear and anxiety. They are busy with thoughts that get in the way of receiving from God. Living in isolation might not be enough to give us much needed rest—literal rest to keep us healthy, to take care of our minds and bodies; but also rest to go to the mountain and spend time with God in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. The garden is filled with thorns and thistles. We need to retreat to the mountain, not to let the anxieties of the moment rob us of our time with the Father. Retreat not to leave the world, but to be fed with the word in order to engage the world rightly. Crises suck the life and joy out of people. We lose the ability to play, to step back and rejoice in God's gifts. In restless times, reclaim the playground of God's creation: play your guitar, enjoy a beverage, do some gardening, catch up with friends on the phone. When it seems like the world is ending, take time to pray, get some extra sleep, and sing, play, or listen to an old favorite tune. These are acts of defiant hope against all hope, acts of bold faith in the God of Jesus Christ, who's got the whole wide world in his hands.

*Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.*

# Laokouxiang (Kou) Seying (1964-2019)

I first met Kou Seying by reputation. It was in June of 2000 when I began my second tenure as a faculty member for Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana. My assignment was to teach missions courses and supervise the doctoral program in missiology. As I settled into my new role, graduate students, faculty members, and staff began saying things to me like, “Do you know Kou Seying? He was one of our best students and such a wonderful man. He was such a joy to have around, to have in the program. You have to meet him.” He had left his residential program just before my arrival.

It was two years later when I met Kou face-to-face, and at once I could see why he was so well-respected and loved. His contagious smile, open and outgoing personality, combined with an energy and enthusiasm in all that he did, were apparent. We first hit it off, though, talking about something that we soon found was dear to both of us—aviation. We both loved to fly, to talk about flying, to talk about airplanes, and to talk about beautiful sights only seen in the air from the cockpit of a Cessna Skyhawk or Skylane (check out his Facebook page for an example). Kou was an accomplished pilot, having earned a commercial pilot license with an instrument rating. He was also a Certified Flight Instructor.

Without a doubt, however, what defined Kou Seying more than anything in the minds of many of us who knew him was that he was driven by a deep concern for those people who are living in fear and uncertainty, who do not know Jesus as the Way and the Truth and Life, who are plagued by capricious spirits of their own, as he would say, “diabolical,” man-made religious systems. His love and empathy for all people who are suffering from the “bondage of the terrifying and mysterious” powers of nature were evident throughout his years of service to Christ’s kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

Kou was especially concerned for those who struggled the most to make a life in America; that is, immigrants and refugees. He did not talk much about his own experience, but having been forced as a young man, along with his parents and

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## **Editor’s note**

*This essay first appeared at [www.concordiatheology.org](http://www.concordiatheology.org) shortly after Kou Seying’s death on November 23, 2019. Rev. Seying was the Lutheran Foundation Professor of Urban and Cross-Cultural Ministry, associate dean for urban and cross-cultural ministry, and associate professor of practical theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, since 2015.*

siblings, to flee his homeland of Laos at the end of the Vietnam War, instilled in him a compassion for others who found themselves in a new land trying to make sense of it all.

This empathy he felt was toward people from all parts of the world—Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East. But especially it was his love toward his own people, the Hmong, that stood out the most to those who knew Kou and his ministry well. One cannot help but make the comparison with the Apostle Paul’s deep love toward *his* own people, the Israelites:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. (Rom 9:1–3)

One can almost hear Kou saying those same words in reference to *his* kinsmen. He sought tirelessly to articulate the worldview of the Hmong people, a challenging task. The Hmong people were impacted by a myriad of religious and spiritual influences as they moved around Asia. Even today the story is complicated as new movements in Hmong spirituality continue to appear.

Yet Kou helped the people of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, dominated by a Western worldview, to understand Hmong culture and worldview to more effectively bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to his people. In November of 2014 and May of 2015 two articles of his were published in *Missio Apostolica* (now known as *Lutheran Mission Matters*). In those articles he endeavored to outline the history of Hmong ministry in the LCMS, including a discussion of Hmong cosmology, an explanation of Hmong spirituality, as well as challenges and suggested approaches to bringing the gospel to the Hmong.<sup>2</sup>

Kou’s concern for the suffering of his kinsmen is evident at the very beginning of his article, “Hmong Spiritism.” He gets right to the point: “Before further discussion on Hmong Spiritism, it is important first to establish the primary reason for such writing as this. People who are influenced by Spiritism are afflicted, oppressed, and in constant fear. The bottom line is that they are suffering.”<sup>3</sup> The suffering of his people affected him deeply.

He wanted those coming from the Western perspective to grasp that Hmong culture is different, that Hmong people look at life differently, that they explain the world and what happens in the world differently. In that same article on Hmong Spiritism, after discussing some of the phenomena that Hmong people involved in Spiritism experience, such as dreams, premonitions, erratic behavior, hearing voices, and so on, he must have envisioned a skeptical Western readership as he goes back to his central point: “As incredible and skeptical as these symptoms may sound, the bottom line is that people are suffering. It is only by the grace of God, through faith

in Jesus Christ with the power of His Holy Spirit that the Hmong people can live above the powers of Satan.”<sup>4</sup> This shows the heart of Kou Seying.

During his time on the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Kou worked to bring about an understanding of the non-Western world to the fore. His calling as Associate Dean of Urban and Cross-Cultural Ministry was a perfect fit for someone with his experience. In a 2016 article published in *Concordia Seminary*, he described how he viewed his role:

My position is to help the Seminary be accountable with diversity. The Church has to accept this challenge as an opportunity to embrace and be accountable to the biblical mandate Jesus gives to us . . . Our accountability begins there. You can't ignore your neighbors just because they have a different country of birth or cultures that are different from yours. The Gospel must go to all nations and all the world is here. If we do not embrace these opportunities, the Church, and the LCMS will be irrelevant in a very short time.”<sup>5</sup>

Kou taught us the importance of relationships over against a culture that values time and task above people. He taught us how a communal culture functions, emphasizing both the negative and positive. He taught us how honor and shame are integral to the worldview of the majority of people living in the world today and helped us understand how those dynamics are both biblical and a challenge to those of us who come from an individualistic, task-oriented culture.

The seminary, and our church, will miss that voice calling us to accountability. In many ways, I am sure he felt like “a voice in the wilderness.” I know he felt frustration at times at the lack of progress, the obstacles in the way, the lack of understanding, or maybe even the lack of a willingness to try to understand. Even so, Kou was always a gentleman. He patiently continued in his mission to help build a culture of appreciation for the diverse cultures of God's world. He sought to build bridges to understanding by treating others with kindness, empathy, and respect. Those of us who remain now that he is with his Savior must honor his memory by recommitting ourselves to those positive values and commitments that he held to and exhibited in his life and ministry.

*Douglas L. Rutt*

## Endnotes

- 1 Jackie Parker, “Helping the Seminary be Accountable in a Diverse World,” *Concordia Seminary* (January 2016): 24–25.
- 2 Kou Seying, “Hmong Mission in LCMS,” *Missio Apostolica* 22, no. 2 (November 2014): 309–328, and “Hmong Spiritism,” *Missio Apostolica* 23, no. 1, (May 2015): 93–101.
- 3 Seying, “Hmong Spiritism,” 93.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 95.
- 5 Parker, “Helping the Seminary,” 25.

# *Articles*



# A Theological Foundation for Stewardship

Joel Biermann



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The Christian life begins at the baptismal font. God calls and claims his own, Christ's gifts are given, and the Spirit indwells the newly redeemed. In another sense, it is right to say that the Christian life begins even before time when God makes his sovereign choice. Stretching into an infinite future within Christ's eschatological fulfillment, the Christian life is vast and comprehensive. Rightly conceived, the Christian life is simply

the description of a child of God living all of life as a child of God. This Christian life has been variously named and understood; terms like discipleship, holy living, Christ-likeness, conformity to God's will, new obedience, and sanctification have been used to capture the reality of the Christian life. Another term that must be added to the list of descriptors of the Christian life is *stewardship*. Some may object that while stewardship may be a part of the Christian life, it hardly captures the whole of it, but such thinking about stewardship is too narrow and ultimately inadequate. Stewardship is a synonym for the life of a Christian who is living rightly within all of his relationships: before God as well as before his fellow creatures. Stewardship is the Christian life and the Christian life is stewardship.

## ***"In the Beginning..."***

Stewardship, more particularly, names the practice of rightly managing or caring for

## *God-pleasing human activity should serve the creation.*

that which belongs to another. This means that a consideration of stewardship must take into account place, purpose, and responsibility in this world. Consequently, any successful attempt to come to a right understanding of stewardship must come to terms with the doctrine of creation. It seems wise then, to begin with the beginning; after all, a prerequisite for a solid understanding of stewardship is a solid understanding of creation. But establishing a basis in creation is not as easy as it may seem. Serious thinking about the doctrine of creation and its implications happens rarely. Too often, acrimonious debate over origins and the place of science in the theological task hijacks discussions about creation. While arguments about evolutionary claims, the correct understanding of *day*, and the age of the earth have their place, they are not particularly helpful when it comes to understanding our *raison d'être*; and when they curtail more careful and fruitful reflection on the significance of God's work of creation for Christian living, such preoccupations can be harmful.

The need for theological thinking that takes creation seriously was capably addressed in the twentieth century, and we can use this foundation to good advantage.<sup>1</sup> God's action of creating has countless implications for Christians. It means that the created realm is good. It is God's work. Further, the creation is the specific object of God's love and care, and the justification for the creation of humanity. Drawn from clay, and filled with God's animating spirit, we are of the earth, with the prescribed task of subduing and ruling over the earth. Quite appropriately, Genesis 1:28 has been dubbed *the first great commission*: "God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" Recognizing the normative and formative role of the creation account, God's command is not merely a directive for Adam, but is the commission for all humanity. In light of the creation account, this is obviously not a mandate to dictatorship or abuse of the creation. It is a holy charge to provide care and direction to the creation. This is our task. It is our reason for existence. Notwithstanding the Christian traditions that relate our purpose to God's glorification<sup>2</sup>, Scripture actually supplies an answer to the question "why am I here?" that looks not up to heaven, but around at creation. We are here to look after the creation. We are creation's stewards. Grounded in the concrete, creative work of God, our earthbound task is inherently holy.

Living in an industrialized society with an economy increasingly detached from the land and oriented toward "service," it may seem nostalgic or irrelevant to argue that humanity's purpose is grounded in the earth. Nevertheless, this is precisely the

foundation that must be grasped for right thinking about our place in the creation, and our responsibility toward the creation. The beginning of God's revelation makes it clear that we exist for the sake of the creation. Rightly directed and God-pleasing human activity should serve the creation. Creation certainly includes humanity, so service to fellow creatures includes service to other human creatures. Thus, most gainful employment finds a place within this understanding of humanity's purpose.<sup>3</sup> This understanding also provides new perspective on the sort of work that is often diminished or devalued as routine or mundane. What is done simply to fulfill the demands of the daily schedule may be deemed ordinary and unexceptional; but when undertaken for the sake of the creation, it is precisely the work that needs doing, and is important and precious as it fulfills its place within God's plan for his creation.

God created us for the sake of the creation. We are to use our unique human abilities to care for the creation around us. Thus, our purpose is tied to the creation, and we are complete or fulfilled not by escaping the created realm, but by embracing our role and work within the created realm. Unlike religions and philosophies that contend that we should strive for release from the material realm, Christianity actually drives us into the midst of the creation, and anchors us in the material relationships that we share with every other creature. Thus, the goal of living is not somehow to escape the creation, or the material world, or the mundane realities of ordinary life. Nor should one yearn for a higher or more spiritual mode of existence, or aim to become some greater order of being. Instead, we recognize that as creatures of God, we are responsible to fulfill this task within the creation to the best of our ability. God created us for this. The goal of human existence, then, is to become fully human.

Consistent with this way of thinking, sin is failure to do what God has us to do. Such failure makes us less than human, that is, in some sense, in-human. Sin is a departure from God's good plan, and a rebellion against God's design. The story of salvation, beginning with the proto-evangelion in the garden of Eden and culminating in the eschatological consummation of the apocalypse, is the story of God's work to return us to the plan, and to restore us and all of creation to the Creator's design. This is what it means to begin with the first article of the creed, rather than the second. In fact, the second article with its focus on the Son's work of redemption only makes sense when seen in light of the Father's original action of creation.<sup>4</sup> The Son's work is for the sake of the creation, and the Son seeks to restore all of creation. The objective is the restoration of humanity to its right place within the creation—including, of course, humanity's right place before the Creator. This is precisely the Father's eternal plan fully accomplished in the Son's obedient mission in the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup> Human beings, then,

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*"The Christian life begins at the baptismal font." The font at the entrance of Concordia Seminary's Chapel of Saint Timothy and Saint Titus (Photo: Bridgette Sharp).*

can only grasp their identity and purpose from the perspective of God's work of creation and redemption.

### ***Learning with Luther***

The themes outlined above find powerful affirmation and elaboration in the work of Martin Luther. In the introductory remarks to his commentary on Galatians, Luther distinguishes between the righteousness Christians receive by grace in their relationship before God, and the righteousness achieved by their humble and faithful service to those around them in the world.<sup>6</sup> With this distinction, Luther positions the believer's relationship to the rest of creation, as the object of God's work of redemption. In other words, and put somewhat bluntly, people are not saved so that they can "go to heaven someday," they are saved so that they can be fully human and accomplish what God put them on earth to do. This is precisely Luther's point as he finishes his introductory comments on Paul's epistle. Having celebrated God's justifying gift of passive righteousness, Luther concludes:

When I have this righteousness within me, I descend from heaven like the rain that makes the earth fertile. That is, I come forth into another kingdom, and I perform good works whenever the opportunity arises. If I am a minister of the Word, I preach, I comfort the saddened, I administer the sacraments. If I am a father, I rule my household and family, I train my children in piety and honesty. If I am a magistrate, I perform the office which I have received by divine command. If I am a servant, I faithfully tend to my master's affairs. In short, whoever knows for sure that Christ is his righteousness not only cheerfully and gladly works in his calling but also submits himself for the sake of love to magistrates, also to their wicked laws, and to everything else in this present life—even, if need be, to burden and danger. For he knows that God wants this and that this obedience pleases Him.<sup>7</sup>

The passage is remarkable on several counts, but most significant in the present discussion, is Luther's hearty endorsement of the varied responsibilities and tasks that attend life in this world. God gives us Christ's forgiveness, and then immediately compels us to return to the world and our responsibilities within the world. Our existence is grounded in the realities of creation and our purpose belongs to those realities. Redemption in Christ does not negate, but reaffirms the pursuit of mundane creaturely existence.

Luther's argument in the great Galatians commentary was not the first time the reformer had considered the importance of ordinary work in the world. This emphasis on our responsibility as creatures to be in relationship with the surrounding world

was a foundational concept undergirding his theological work. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to consider this Luther's *other breakthrough*. The anguished and weary monk's discovery of the liberating and comforting message of the gospel is familiar enough, and aptly referenced as Luther's breakthrough. But in the early part of the 1520s Luther was making another, related discovery every bit as revolutionary as his reclamation of the gospel: Luther discovered the idea of vocation. In spite of the prevailing assumptions and admonitions of his day, Luther came to understand that one does not serve God best by abandoning his role and responsibilities within

## *Luther came to delight in the work of everyday life.*

the structures and obligations of routine worldly existence for the sake of life in the cloister. Luther came to see that his own decision to enter the monastery was wrong not only because it was a futile and dangerous pursuit of righteousness through

works, but because it meant the renunciation of his role as son. "For my vow was not worth a fig, since by taking it I withdrew myself from the authority and guidance of the parent [to whom I was subject] by God's commandment; indeed it was a wicked vow."<sup>8</sup> So, Luther came to delight in the work of everyday life—simply living in the relationships and responsibilities established by birth and by duty. This is the heart of Luther's understanding of vocation. Vocation is nothing more than doing what God has given one to do within the relationships of creation.

Gustaf Wingren wrote the book on Luther and vocation—literally.<sup>9</sup> The Swedish scholar's focused exploration of Luther's corpus makes clear how pervasive and compelling Luther's other breakthrough was for his theology. In an essay from early in his career, Wingren summarizes Luther's position with sharp and poignant clarity:

In heaven Christ reigns with His Gospel, that is to say, with pure giving and grace. Man enters this heavenly Kingdom through faith, which receives and lays hold on the Gospel and thereby on Christ Himself. But the neighbor lives on earth, and one does not believe and trust in him. One does not receive salvation from him, but rather serves the neighbor in one's daily work. We may set forth the following proposition: If man seeks to take the *works* which God commands him to do and bring these works *before God*, man thereby abolishes God's order both in "heaven" and on "earth." For in heaven the Gospel reigns alone. Here to seek to place works *before God* as a means of justification is an attempt to depose Christ from His throne. Man allows his works to compete with the King of heaven. But at the same time *the neighbor* is pushed aside in the

*earthly* kingdom, for works are not done for the neighbor's sake, but in order that I might adorn myself with them before God. Christ is "dethroned" in heaven and the neighbor is "dethroned" on earth.<sup>10</sup>

The force of this argument is startling, and challenges conventional assumptions about Christian piety. Following Luther, Wingren contends that one does not do good works for God's sake, but for the neighbor's sake. Christian service, then, is marked not by a driving obsession to "do something for Jesus," nor with a fundamental compulsion to express love and gratitude to God by doing good works. Rather, the Christian does good works in an effort to meet the needs of the neighbor, period.

Interestingly, this is the clear message of Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats—a scriptural narrative often advanced in support of the idea that a Christian lives to serve God. In this parable depicting the final judgment, Jesus certainly does acknowledge union with "the least of these," thereby affirming both a remarkably lofty view of the church and God's participation in the lives of the saints. Yet, the parable places emphatic stress on the thoroughgoing ignorance attending the service of the sheep. The sheep on Christ's right hand must be told about the significance of their acts of compassion. It is obvious from their questions to Jesus that they had not spent their days seeking ways to serve God. An explicit point of the parable is that the good works of the sheep are done purely for the sake of those in need, without the intent of "doing something for Jesus" (Mt 25:31–46). This was exactly the lesson learned by Luther, and this idea shaped his understanding of the Christian life and the place of the Christian's work. A Christian's work is not aimed inward—a self-serving effort at personal fulfillment is antithetical to the Christian faith. Nor is a Christian's work aimed upward—a pious desire to "give God my best" is not what animates a follower of Christ, and may devolve into works-righteousness that diminishes the importance and dignity of the neighbor. Rather, a Christian's life is spent aimed outward—attentive to the needs of the neighbor and then actively working to meet those needs. And so, as Luther would have it, the Christian lives by faith and by love: "He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor."<sup>11</sup>

For Luther, *vocation* names the responsibilities and even the obligations that are placed on us by virtue of our being creatures within the world. Children, parents, spouse, employer, and employee—all have tasks that need to be fulfilled for the sake of other creatures. These works of service for fellow creatures are grounded in the structure and purpose of this world—they are the individualized form taken as each person strives to "have dominion" and fulfill that particular purpose within creation. This understanding of vocation is precisely illustrated in the "table of duties" appended to Luther's Small Catechism.<sup>12</sup> In terms of another Lutheran distinction, these consuming tasks belong to the left-hand realm of God's activity within this world.

The works are done for the sake of sustaining and supporting the good functioning of the creation—an objective established by the Creator and affirmed in the work of redemption. So, when Christians do what they have been given to do, and fulfill their responsibilities in the home, in the workplace, in the city and country, and even in the church, this is done for the simple reason that they are creatures acting as creatures are intended to act. Working within and for the sake of the various estates or venues of God’s creation is what God’s creatures do. Such service, then, is not directly a matter of one’s relationship to God—the purview of God’s right-hand activity—and has, in a sense, nothing whatsoever to do with the gospel. Vocation is for the left-hand realm; it belongs to this world.

### **A Twofold Rule**

In keeping with the legacy of Luther and in an effort to sharpen the argument and refocus on the task, consider the following two-part axiom:

A life of Christian stewardship has nothing to do with the Christian’s relationship with God.

A life of Christian stewardship has everything to do with the Christian’s relationship with God.<sup>13</sup>

On the face of it, the first statement may seem altogether impossible. Yet, in light of the previous argument, it proves to be an accurate, albeit provocative, expression of the truth. By now, it should be obvious that what commonly and conveniently has been called stewardship is, in fact, little more than living responsibly within the structures and obligations of the created realm. Our work in the world has its basis in the fact that we are a part of the creation and have a role to play within that creation. Whether or not we confess or even acknowledge the reality of the Creator is not altogether relevant; more important in this context is that we recognize and perform our creaturely roles. The point of the axiom’s first statement is that stewardship is the practice of living faithfully and dutifully, using personal and corporate resources, abilities, and opportunities for the sake of the rest of creation. Stewardship merely names the activity and practice of responsible living within creation and is not a practice peculiar to Christians. Indeed, even a Christian carries out the tasks of such competent daily living simply for the sake of the creation—it is the task a Christian has been given. And so the first half of the stewardship rule, excluding God from the work of stewardship, is perhaps not as impious as it initially appeared. Truly, that God cannot be the intended recipient of human efforts at good works or service is apparent when one considers the absurdity and even impiety of hoping to offer God anything—as if God had need or desire for what his creatures are able to give. Thus, it is good and right that a Christian focuses not on “serving God,” but on serving neighbor.

The second breath of the twofold rule also speaks truth since a life of stewardship is grounded in God's gracious act of justification, animated and driven by the ongoing presence of the Spirit, and shaped by the will of the Creator. While Christians may

*Those who live faithfully  
commit with abandon to  
the needs of the neighbor.*

be engrossed in the effort to meet the responsibilities toward fellow creatures—as well we should be—we are at once continually aware of the profound realities of our relationship before God. We know that we stand there, before God, only by grace; that justification is the incomprehensible gift of a God who loves without limit; and that apart from the Spirit's comfort and power, no work of service and no good deed would be possible. All of the Christian life—including the life of service within creation—is lived within the overarching context of God's justifying work. In that sense, stewardship has everything to do with the believer's relationship with God. Rightly grasping sanctification as the monergistic work of God the Spirit within and through the Christian, it is also quite true that stewardship has everything to do with God—it is God alone who makes possible and indeed actually accomplishes the service that defines stewardship.<sup>14</sup> Finally, as faithful stewardship fulfills the Creator's purpose, it will naturally conform to the Creator's design and will. That is to say, God and his intention for the creation determines the actual shape of Christian stewardship. Without God's normative will, stewardship's reality would be arbitrary and subject to the whims and fancies of each individual. On the contrary, worthy stewardship is always normed by God who provides the necessary direction and shape of the service.

Like the other essential tensions that mark Christian faith, the tension at the core of rightly understanding stewardship is not to be resolved. Both aspects of the stewardship axiom advanced above must stand and be granted full latitude to declare their truth. Conditioning or mitigating one side of the rule in light of the other diminishes the overall impact of the truth. Maintaining the tension calls for a degree of vigilance, of course, but careful attention to upholding a duality is hardly a new prospect for the conscientious disciple. So, those who live faithfully commit with abandon to the needs of the neighbor, striving to accomplish good for the neighbor; while at the same time, acknowledging that they are nothing, and can do nothing apart from God's sustaining grace. They give themselves completely to the work within creation, knowing always the complete dependence upon the Creator for everything.

### ***The Faith of our Fathers***

Christians who live as the blessed beneficiaries of the rich legacy of C. F. W. Walther are usually familiar with his instruction on how best to provoke the fruits of faith in

the lackadaisical congregation that is stingy in good works. With great conviction, the theologian and churchman argued that only the gospel is able to produce the desired harvest of good works: “The word of God is not rightly divided . . . when an endeavor is made, by means of the commands of the Law rather than by the admonitions of the Gospel, to urge the regenerate to do good.”<sup>15</sup> With conviction equal to their theological forebear, Walther’s heirs have submitted to this counsel, but in the process, sometimes have tried to outdo Walther himself. Not content to follow Walther in trusting the gospel’s ability to transform people into genuine disciples zealous to perform God’s will within the world, some of Walther’s ecclesiastical descendants take a further step by refusing the law any positive role in the Christian’s life of discipleship.

One only needs to read the whole of Walther’s treatment of law and gospel to detect the error in this antinomian train of thought. Walther himself certainly did not dismiss the value of the law in training and even exhorting good works from Christian people: “Here we have a true pattern of the correct sequence: first the Law, threatening men with the wrath of God; next the Gospel, announcing the comforting promises of God. This is followed by an instruction regarding the things we are to do after we have become new men.”<sup>16</sup> In fairness, it should be noted that earlier on the same page, Walther tells his students: “The moment a person accepts the grace which brought God down from heaven that grace begins to train him. The object of this training is to teach him how to do good works and lead an upright life.” Clearly, Walther wants to include instruction in Christian living within the purview of the gospel. If one operates with a sharp understanding of the law as that which demands our works and the gospel as the word which forgives and comforts, it is difficult to understand how one might advance the idea that grace instructs. A significant question yet to be addressed, then, is the way that one defines and understands the law, and its role in the Christian life.

How one reads and understands Walther is more than a question of history or textual hermeneutics. It is illustrative of a theological approach that has had a profound impact on the thinking of many Lutheran theologians, leaders, and congregations in the recent past—with remarkable practical consequences still felt today. The problem is a peculiar form of antinomianism closely tied or even identified with what has been called “law/gospel reductionism.”<sup>17</sup> Obviously, a host of factors contributed to the rise of this errant theological paradigm; and the part played by a misappropriation of Walther’s teaching is probably not the most compelling among them. Still, given the stature and influence rightly accorded this synodical father, Walther’s legacy is significant—and in the current discussion about stewardship, it is crucial. Coupled with the pervasive influence of law/gospel reductionism, the idea that Walther rejected any place for the law in the production of good works has made a lasting impact on the way that many pastors and congregations have understood

and practiced stewardship. Indeed, the reigning assumption typically elevated to the status of a theological dictum, or at least a theological shibboleth, is that a genuine stewardship worthy to be called Lutheran must be motivated only by the gospel. The law, naturally, is absolutely excluded aside from its necessary preparatory work of laying bare and convicting sinful and selfish hearts. Indeed, the faithful practitioner of this theological method is usually quick to label any attempt to use the law in a positive way as a form of legalism that gravely threatens the gospel and Christian freedom.<sup>18</sup>

The outcome of this thinking has been what often amounts to a practice of stewardship and stewardship training that is limited to eloquent presentations of God's giving and grace with an expectant, if not overly confident, hope that the result will be the desired life of fruit-production. Admittedly, this is not a fundamentally wrong understanding of the Christian life. Walther did not create the idea of gospel as motivation *de novo*. Like any orthodox theologian, Walther would have disavowed any suggestion that his work was innovative. His desire was an accurate expression of the truth as it had always been taught. So, it is not surprising to find the idea of the gospel's power to motivate present in St. Paul: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1). And the same line of thought is readily apparent in the work of Luther, as the authors of the Formula were well aware: "O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly."<sup>19</sup> Walther, Luther, and St. Paul concur. It is altogether reasonable and arguably admirable, then, that practical contemporary expressions of Lutheran theology would emulate their ancestors and offer an understanding of stewardship as the spontaneous result of justification. God gives grace . . . the Christian produces a life of good works. God showers his love, and believers respond with committed and humble service—done.

With such compelling and credentialed evidence in support of what may be called the standard understanding of stewardship, it may seem foolhardy to propose any other approach. Yet, responsible theological thinking demands a more comprehensive—and more effective—concept of stewardship. Walther's example of a willingness to use the law in more than only its exposing and killing function was noted above. A similar broad conception of the law, evidenced by a willingness to use the law as a fitting instrument for training in Christian living, can also be found in Luther and St. Paul's writings. Luther's catechisms abound with such examples: "It is useful and necessary, I say, always to teach, admonish, and remind young people of all of this so that they may be brought up, not only with blows and compulsion, like cattle, but in the fear and reverence of God."<sup>20</sup>

One of the most memorable instances of Luther's willingness to use the law to instruct and even motivate, though, is found in a letter Luther sent to his son Hans,

composed while the reformer was advising the Augsburg delegation from the safe distance of Koburg castle. After promising to bring Hans “a nice present from the fair” if he continued to do well in his studies and pray diligently, Luther describes at length a delightful garden of joys reserved for children “who like to pray, study, and be good.” The concerned father then offers a final word of encouragement to his son in Wittenberg: “Therefore, dear son Hänschen, do study and pray diligently, and tell Lippus and Jost to study and pray too; then you [boys] will get into the garden together.”<sup>21</sup> Luther was not above using what some might call bribery in the effort to instill good habits in his child.

The Apostle Paul’s epistolary pattern of concluding with explicit instruction and exhortation for specific behavior is well known and variously explained. Seeking cover in a technical term such as “paranesis” or in a novel label like “gospel admonition” to account for Paul’s practice is a typical way of dodging the bare fact that the apostle seems to experience no discomfort in using the law to teach and even incite his readers to zealous Christian living.<sup>22</sup> One of the most interesting instances in the Pauline corpus appears in 2 Corinthians 8 when the apostle is concerned about that young congregation’s readiness to contribute toward the famine relief effort for the first-century saints in Jerusalem. Certainly, Paul recognizes the impact that God’s love shown in Christ should have on these new believers and the use of their resources to help others.<sup>23</sup> There is an expectation that the gospel will make a difference in the lives of these people. However, Paul does not merely declare the gospel and then wait for a spontaneous outpouring of generosity and good works. Quite the opposite, a careful reading of the entire chapter reveals a concerted effort on the part of the founder of the Corinthian congregation to ensure robust support for the financial campaign using a host of tactics.

Paul begins by praising the gift of the less affluent Macedonian Christians; then, inciting a spirit of competition, the apostle admonishes the Corinthians not to be outdone (vv. 1–8). Paul presses his case with an appeal from the standpoint of fairness, or as it colloquially captured, today, “what goes around comes around” (vv. 10–15). Finally, he makes a bald appeal to pride: when Titus comes to collect, they should be ready and not shame themselves and Paul (vv. 22–24). Paul’s strong approach continues into chapter 9, and it takes little imagination or insight to detect even more instances of Paul’s pragmatic appeal to his reader’s less altruistic motives. The most natural reading of this text presents a readily recognizable picture of a persuasive fund-raising effort that relies on a variety of entreaties and motivations to provoke the desired response from his readers. Well aware of man’s broken nature—and equally cognizant of the Christian’s nature as both old Adam and new creation—Paul is not above reinforcing his financial appeal with arguments aimed at the new man (reminders of God’s giving in Christ) as well as the old (appeals to competition, pride, and self-preservation). The power of the gospel is not dismissed, but neither is the effective use of the law overlooked.

## **The Place of the Law**

The critical question, inevitably, reasserts itself: what role does the law play in the Christian's life of stewardship? It is clear that Paul, Luther, and even Walther readily employed exhortations and inducements to right behavior that exceeded mere reliance on the new motivations touched off by the power of the gospel. As mentioned above, there have been assorted efforts at creating original terms and redefining existing ones with the hope of steering around a positive understanding of the law. Ultimately, however, the issue centers on the nature and place of instruction and exhortation within the Christian's life.<sup>24</sup> Is such exhortation an aspect of the gospel—perhaps even a “second use of the gospel”?<sup>25</sup> Are such good works the “fruit of the Spirit” and therefore unrelated to the law? The urge to subsume encouragement and admonition to Christian living within the parameters of the gospel is understandable. It honors the New Testament truth that in Christ we are new creations (2 Cor 5:17, Gal 6:15). Nevertheless, to insist that the sort of exhortation or even enticement employed by Paul, Luther, or Walther is not the law but an aspect of the gospel is a theological mistake with significant practical consequences. The error, it seems, stems from the erroneous assumption that the law is inherently negative and therefore a repressive burden from which one must be freed. The law does have a condemning, killing effect. Indeed, Melancthon put a sharp point on this in the Apology with his declaration: *semper accusat*.<sup>26</sup> But, the law does not only accuse.<sup>27</sup> The Formula of Concord provides the definition that resolves the question about the law's place in the life of a believer: “Law has one single meaning, namely the unchanging will of God, according to which human beings are to conduct themselves in this life.”<sup>28</sup> God's plan, his design for the right functioning of creation, is his will for the creation and is given expression as the law. When the creation is operating according to God's will, it is operating according to the law.

The believer is first a creature—the handiwork of God designed for a purpose within the creation. When the believer is living a fully human life, conforming to the intention of the Creator, the believer is living within God's will, and so living within the law. Obviously, this is not a constraining, demeaning, or negative thing. In fact, it is liberation.<sup>29</sup> The law accuses and condemns when we sin, but it is not inherently onerous. Our problem is not God's law, but our own sin. Rightly understood as the will of God, it is clear that the law has existed as a part of the creation from the beginning. Adam and Eve followed God's will, thus obeying the law, without experiencing guilt, condemnation, or irksome compulsion. They were simply doing what they had been created to do. They were living as God's crowning handiwork exercising dominion over the creation. The same dynamic is at work for Adam's children who live today within the creation, but now in the reality of the gospel's restoration. In Christ, they are declared forgiven and restored to a right relationship with their Creator and returned to their places within creation to fulfill the Creator's

intentions for them. They do these tasks—their varied vocations—according to God’s will, that is, according to the law. The law is the shape of the Christian life. This life is not a burden, but a joy. The redeemed and restored creature is doing what he was created to do.

A form of antinomianism—whether complete disregard for God’s revealed will in the name of gospel freedom or simply a reluctance to employ the law positively for fear of legalism—is not the only detrimental result of a wrong understanding of the law. A thoroughgoing negative definition of the law forces the inclusion of Christian exhortation and instruction in holy living (“New Obedience” is the term preferred in the Augustana<sup>30</sup>) into the category of gospel. But, such instruction calls for action from the Christian, which, however motivated, is clearly not a sheer declaration of forgiveness, grace, and comfort for a fallen human being. In fact, the call to action—even action on the part of a gospel-infused believer—is never a word of gospel in the pure sense. Rather, it is a call to conform to God’s will, that is, a call to conform to the law. To include this call within the *gospel* is to add a component of human work to God’s gracious gospel work, thus blunting or obscuring the bald word of divine monergism. In a strange and tragic irony, the desire to enhance the gospel by excluding the law from the life of new obedience actually diminishes the gospel by loading it with an expectation of human performance. This serious danger is easily averted simply by embracing a more holistic and biblical understanding of the law as God’s will for his creation.

### ***A Way of Being***

Conformity to God’s will rightly describes the Christian life, and thus also rightly describes discipleship as well as stewardship. Stewardship, then, is not a matter of fund-raising gimmicks, capital campaigns, budget planning, building maintenance, time-and-talents surveys, or organizing volunteers. Stewardship is more simply and profoundly, God’s people living responsibly within their God-given relationships. As demonstrated above, it is a mistake to assume that this happens automatically or spontaneously. The church and its shepherds should be intentional and deliberate about the process of shaping and encouraging responsible stewardship, or faithful discipleship, or fruitful Christian living—the terms are essentially interchangeable. The process of formation is infinitely varied and nuanced, and yet always in conformity with God’s will. Gospel-soaked reminders of God’s grace have their place, but so do lessons on personal finances, and accountability partners aimed at correcting destructive habits. Appeals to live within the gospel’s reality can be coupled with classes on improving family relationships. The goal, always, is to bring God’s people into greater conformity to God’s will, not by seeking to micromanage every detail or by offering a checklist for every situation, but instead by seeking to instill in each believer the character of a disciple. Good practices and habits clearly have a role

to play, but the focus, ultimately, is on the way of being that is being formed and enhanced. Following our Lord's often misapplied direction, we teach people consistently to invest all of their resources in the right things, confident, that their hearts—their character—will follow and their being will be further shaped into God's design for his

creatures: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt 6:21).

Stewardship is not a *part* of the Christian life. Stewardship is not an important auxiliary component of Christian living. Stewardship is not ancillary to the practice of Christian faith. Stewardship is not optional. One cannot claim fidelity to Christian truth in other respects while ignoring the practice and inculcation of faithful stewardship. Proclamation of the gospel, a focus on forgiveness, or a rigorous commitment to orthodox doctrine, are all worthy practices and defensible paradigms for Christian life and ministry; but none of them obviate the practice of good stewardship. The doctrine of justification cannot be the camouflage beneath which one hopes to hide from the expectations of a call to serious stewardship. The gospel does not negate or displace stewardship; it restores the creature to a life of responsible stewardship. Good theology yields good stewardship; more than that, good theology demands good stewardship.

*Stewardship is simply and profoundly, God's people living responsibly within their God-given relationships.*

## Endnotes

- 1 Two notable examples are the work of Gustaf Wingren, *Creation and Law*, trans. Ross MacKenzie (Muhlenburg Press, 1961), esp. 25–29; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, trans. John C. Fletcher (Touchstone Books, 1959), esp. 49–52.
- 2 This is, of course, the point of departure and so the foundation for the Westminster Shorter Catechism and the theology that builds on this foundation.
- 3 Most, but not all, work is fitting. . . . it should be clear that some activities otherwise rewarded in the world may actually put one at odds with God's intentions for his creation and its caretakers.
- 4 This is clearly expressed in Romans 8:18–25.
- 5 Paul exults in this great plan of salvation in Ephesians 1:3–14.
- 6 *Luther's Works* eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 56 vols. American Edition (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1958–1986), 26:2–12.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 8 *LW* 48:332.
- 9 Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 1999).
- 10 Gustaf Wingren, "Justification by Faith in Protestant Thought," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 9 (December 1956): 375–376.
- 11 From "The Freedom of the Christian" *LW* 31:371.

- 12 The Small Catechism in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 365–367.
- 13 Obviously, the form of this axiom is a shameless and pale appropriation of Luther’s dictum in “The Freedom of the Christian,” yet another of Luther’s landmark essays from the prolific decade of the 1520s. *LW* 31:344.
- 14 For the definitive presentation of sanctification as the work of God apart from any human contribution, see Adolf Köberle, *The Quest for Holiness: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Investigation*, trans. John C. Mattes (Harper & Brothers, 1938; repr., Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 1998).
- 15 C. F. W. Walther. *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 4. (Walther makes stronger arguments in the explication of this, his 23rd thesis. See pages 384–390.)
- 16 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 17 Others have explored this problem at great length and with helpful insight. For a brief but highly influential treatment see David S. Yeago, “Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology: Reflections on the Costs of a Construal,” *Pro Ecclesia* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 37–49. A thorough exploration of the many factors involved in producing 20th- and now 21st-century antinomianism is provided by Scott R. Murray, *Law, Life and the Living God: the Third Use of Law in Modern American Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002).
- 18 The most thorough elaboration of this position may be Gerhard Forde’s locus on the Christian life in Carl E. Braaten, and Robert W. Jenson, eds. *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2:391–469.
- 19 FC SD IV.11 in Kolb and Wengert, 576.
- 20 LC 1.330–332 in Kolb and Wengert, 430–431. Another significant but lengthy example is Luther’s encouragement at the close of his discussion on the second commandment in the Large Catechism (LC 1:70–76 in Kolb and Wengert 395–396). Here, Luther describes and advocates practices that habituate children into the ways of Christian living.
- 21 *LW* 49:323–324.
- 22 For example, in Ephesians 5, the apostle offers specific counsel for the arrangement of the Christian home, while in Romans 13, his concern is the political and fiscal conduct of the Christian in wider society. It is also noteworthy that the Small Catechism’s table of duties is little more than a list of verses drawn primarily from Paul’s letters offering concrete guidance for the conduct of life with its manifold responsibilities.
- 23 Paul reminds them of their standing in the gospel in verse 9.
- 24 Many of these, including the classic effort of Paul Althaus and his academic progeny are considered in Murray’s book.
- 25 This term was suggested by William Lazareth in “Antinomians: Then and Now,” *Lutheran Forum* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 21.
- 26 Ap IV:38, 128 in Kolb and Wengert, 126, 141.
- 27 Many have articulated this position, but perhaps one of the first was Henry J. Eggold Jr. in “The Third Use of the Law,” *Springfielder* 27 (Spring 1963): 20.
- 28 FC VI, SD VI:15 in Kolb and Wengert, 589. In the spirit of the Formula, it is worth noting that Chemnitz expounds on this understanding of the law in his marvelous, but underused, *Enchiridion*. “But when the question is asked, which the works are that God has ordained that we should walk in them (Eph 2:10), then God himself leads us to his commands and precepts (Dt 12:32; Ez 20:19; Rom 3:27). And as Paul is about to point out what the well-pleasing and perfect will of God is with regard to good works (Rom 12:2), he leads us to love, which is a brief summary of the law, and then he expressly lists the commandments of the Decalog (Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14).” Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, ed. and trans. Luther Poellot (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 198), 1, 100.
- 29 For a full treatment of conformity to the law as the only path to genuine human freedom, see Reinhard Hüter. “(Re-)Forming Freedom: Reflections ‘After *Veritatis Splendor*’ On Freedom’s Fate in Modernity and Protestantism’s Antinomian Captivity,” *Modern Theology* 17, no. 2 (April 2001): 117–161.
- 30 AC VI in Kolb and Wengert, 40.

# The Pastor as Chief Steward

## Stewardship in the Congregation

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“**T**his, the first of his signs, Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested his glory” (Jn 2:11). Indeed, Jesus did manifest his glory—he revealed his divine power—in the miracle of changing the water into wine. However, he did not do this apart from the assistance of others. He did this through people. He wrought the transformation through the participation of those who did not expect the miracle to happen or even initially understood their roles in it.

The first people through whom Jesus worked the sign were servants at the banquet. They are identified in the story as *diakonoï* (v. 5), likely the waiters at the wedding feast. Jesus instructed them to fill six stone jars with water (Jn 2:6–7). Then he directed them to take a sample from one of the jars to the “master of the feast” (v. 8). This officer becomes the second type of person used by the Lord to manifest his glory. The Apostle John narrates the episode:

When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.” (Jn 2:9–10)

In so speaking, this official, the *architriklinus* (literally “head of the table”), announced the arrival of the kingdom of God.

The Lord continues to manifest his glory and to advance his kingdom through servants and stewards. He does it through the *diakonoï* who are his baptized saints, but he also does it through one who is placed as head over these servants. This one serves as a kind of *architriklinus* of God’s gospel feast. He is the chief steward. He is the pastor.

As with the *architriklinus* of John’s narrative, so the pastor has two responsibilities. First, the master of the feast facilitated and oversaw the stewardship of the other servants at the banquet. So also, the pastor facilitates and oversees the stewardship of the baptized Christians who are entrusted to his care, but this does not distinguish him from them as stewards. The second responsibility is that of his own stewardship. The pastor also fills the role of a steward; indeed, he is the chief steward. Just as the *architriklinus* was himself a steward of the bridegroom and his father, so the pastor is a steward of Christ and of God the Father. As the master of the feast was ultimately responsible for the service offered and stewardship rendered at the wedding, so the pastor is responsible for his own stewardship and that of those he oversees.

In this essay, we will examine ways the pastor carries out these responsibilities as chief steward. First, we consider the pastor’s own vocation and identity as a steward under the reign of Christ. Then we will investigate the pastor’s role of facilitating and overseeing the stewardship of others in the household of God.

### ***The Pastoral Office: A Vocation of Stewardship***

The identity of the pastor is integrally connected with stewardship. The Apostle Paul explicitly equates the roles of pastor and steward. He writes regarding those in the office of the ministry: “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1). The term “servant” used here connotes the idea of one who is a steward. The word *huperetes* refers to an assistant who carries out the will of his master. For example, John Mark is referred to as the “servant” of Barnabas and Saul (Paul) in Acts 13:5. Paul furthermore equates pastors with stewardship when he calls them “stewards of the mysteries of God.” The word translated as “steward” is *oikonomos*, which typically referred to a household manager or someone put in charge of another person’s business or property. Pastors are placed in charge of the “mysteries (*mysterious*) of God.” A mystery is something formerly hidden which is now revealed. It refers to that which God has revealed apart from his natural creation. It is essentially the revelation of his grace provided through God’s word and sacraments. Accordingly, this has been understood to refer to the means of grace. Pastors are identified as the stewards of the Lord’s word and sacraments.

## Stewardship Involves Authority and Accountability

Entrusted with the means of grace, pastors have also been authorized to use them. Christ gives an authority to those who occupy the office of pastor. The church traditionally has understood this authority to be the keys of the kingdom of God used “to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.”<sup>1</sup> This illustrates the first dynamic of stewardship. A steward is given authority. He is authorized by his master to exercise the work of the master and to employ the resources of the master according to the master’s directive. All stewardship involves such authorization. In the parable of the Talents (Mt 25:14–30) the servants were entrusted with the property (talents) of the master and authorized to make good use of that property. So also, the pastor is authorized to manage well the Lord’s word and sacraments.

With authority also comes accountability. In Jesus’s parable, “after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them” (Mt 25:19). He held the servants accountable for their use and investment of the talents. So also are pastors held accountable to God. Paul emphasizes that accountability, “Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy” (1 Cor 4:2). The very identity of a steward requires one to be held accountable. Pastors hold such accountability before God to have faithfully administered the means of grace and to have attended to the spiritual well-being of God’s flock entrusted to them. Paul continues this understanding: “With me it is a very small thing that I should

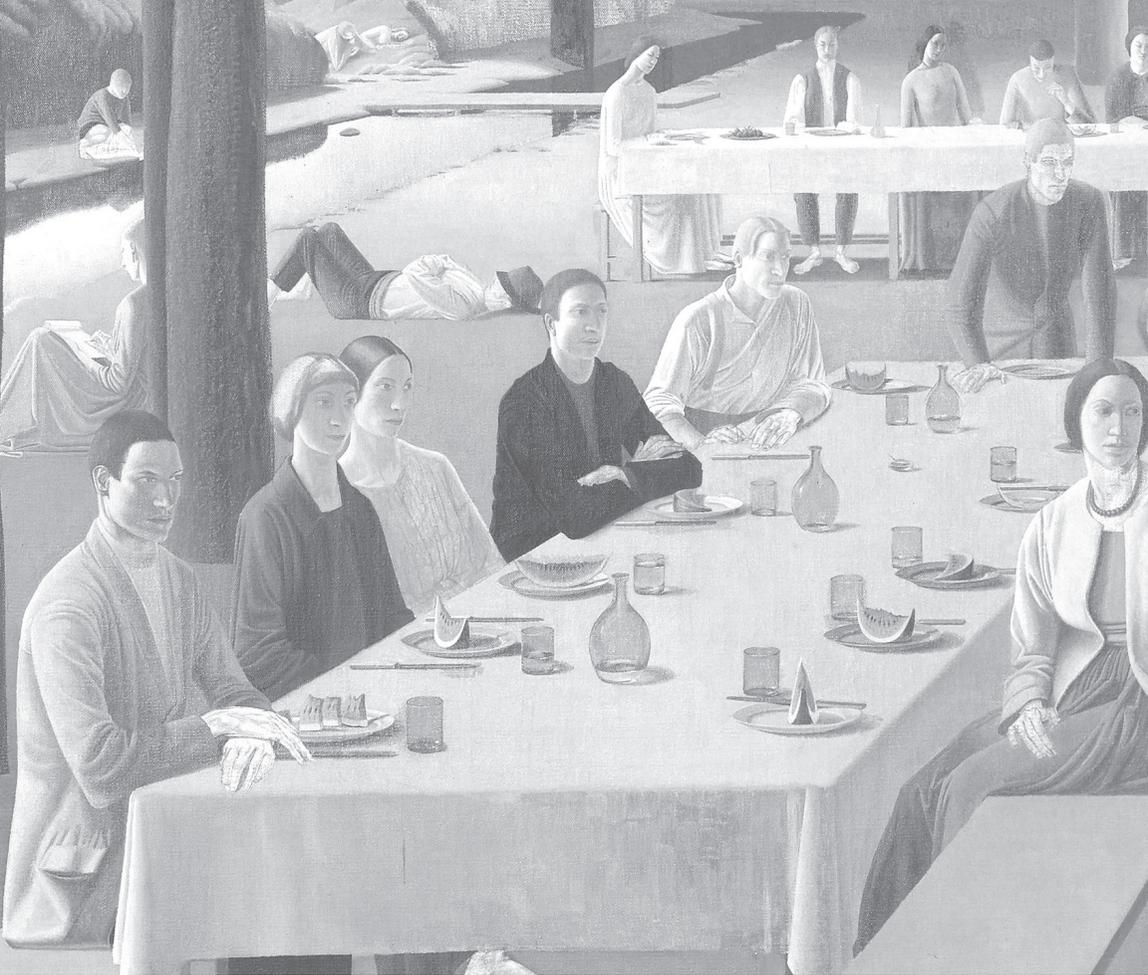
be judged by you [the church] or by any human court [the world]. In fact, I do not even judge myself. . . . It is the Lord who judges me” (vv. 3–4).

Paul’s ultimate accountability for his stewardship (and ours as well) is not to the ecclesial community, nor to the broader society, not even to himself and his personal standards. His ultimate accountability is to God.

Thus, the two essential dynamics of stewardship—authority received from the master and accountability delivered to the master—are part of the warp and woof of pastoral ministry. Pastors, as stewards of the Master, are authorized to administer the means of grace while being held responsible for their faithful use. They continue the ministry of Jesus, as their predecessors the apostles did, both by Christ’s authority and with accountability to him.

Such is the nature of leadership. Max DePree, an expert on leadership dynamics, asserts, “Leadership is a concept of *owing* certain things to the institution. It is . . . a way of thinking about *stewardship* as contrasted with ownership.”<sup>2</sup> All leaders are stewards. A CEO of a multi-billion dollar corporation has significant authority, but is accountable to the corporation’s board of directors and to stockholders. The president

*With authority also comes accountability.*



of the United States exercises immense authority, but is accountable to the electorate. A military officer exercises authority over those of lesser rank, but is accountable to those who hold higher rank. The centurion who petitioned Jesus's aid recognized this truth: "I am a man under authority, with soldiers under me" (Mt 8:9). Likewise, a pastor has been authorized to exercise the Office of the Keys, but he is accountable for the faithful exercise of such authority. As such, his identity is that of a steward and his functioning is that of stewardship.

### **Stewardship of the Means of Grace**

We have seen that pastors are entrusted with "the mysteries of God"—the means of grace, God's word and sacraments. This is confirmed in various scriptural passages. Paul writes of "the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation" (Eph 2:3). Since the pastoral office is, in part, a continuation of the apostolic office that Paul occupied, pastors continue this



*“The Marriage at Cana” by Winifred Knights (1923, oil on canvas, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa) (PD-US).*

stewardship of the grace of God by delivering the revelation of that grace to people through preaching and teaching the gospel and by administering the sacraments. In 2 Corinthians 3:6 the apostle identifies himself and his colleagues, whom we can assume fill the pastoral office, to be “ministers of a new covenant.” The context of this passage indicates that the new covenant is the Spirit-bestowed and life-giving gospel. Similarly, in Colossians 1:23 Paul identifies himself as a servant of the gospel. He clearly understood himself to be a steward of the gospel in all its forms—scripture, proclamation, sacrament. The pastor is a steward of the means of grace in his role as the “servant of the word.”

Paul also wrote to his protégé in ministry, Timothy, exhorting him to “guard the

good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Tm 1:14). The previous verse (2 Tm 1:13) makes clear that this deposit is the “pattern of sound words” which comprises orthodox doctrine based on the unadulterated word of God. The point is this deposit has been *entrusted* to Timothy (as it was to Paul, see v. 12); that is, he is a steward of that deposit. No wonder that the apostle later encourages the young pastor Timothy: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tm 2:15). Note first that the object of Timothy’s stewardship is “the word of truth.” This is where his authority lies, but also there is accountability as Timothy’s labor is to be approved by God.

Another pastor whom Paul had mentored is Titus. In the first chapter of his letter to Titus, the apostle authorizes him to “appoint elders in every town” and identifies the qualifications for such leaders (Ti 1:5f). Such an overseeing leader is expressly identified as “God’s steward” (v. 7) who exemplifies a life of spiritual and personal maturity but whose task is to “hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (v. 9). It is clear here that the primary stewardship carried out by these elders/overseers is that of the word of God. The pastor accordingly both delivers that word faithfully and protects it from attack and corruption. This exemplifies the role of being a steward of the word of God, and therefore of the means of God’s grace.

## Stewardship of People

Not only is the pastor entrusted with the means of grace, he is also entrusted with the people to whom he delivers these means. He is responsible to attend to the spiritual life and care of those members of the congregation to which he has been called. He has a stewardship of these saints! Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in those passages of scripture that depict the called leader of a congregation as a *shepherd*. In fact, this is so common a metaphor for those who fill the office of public ministry that the word *pastor*—that is, “shepherd”—has become a metonymy for the role.<sup>3</sup>

In Acts 20, the Apostle Paul summoned the elders of the Ephesian church to meet with him in Miletus. He exhorted them: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (v. 28). Several insights are here. First, the apostle encourages the elders to watch themselves, indicating that they have a stewardship of their own lives and behavior before God. Pastors are to steward their personal and ministerial lives. Second, these leaders are to attend to the flock that is God’s church. The flock does not belong to the leader but to God—it is God’s flock and God’s church which he has purchased through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Third, God himself has placed the elders in this position of leadership and of stewardship, for the Holy Spirit is the one who makes them overseers. Thus, they are authorized by God and accountable to him, but the primary emphasis here is that the

object of these pastors' stewardship is *people*—the flock of God, the church of God. As such, pastors are stewards not only of the means of grace, they are stewards of the persons who receive that grace.

Similarly, the Apostle Peter exhorts the elders of the Christian congregations in Asia Minor to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Pt 5:1). As with Paul, Peter expressly identifies the flock as belonging to God, not to human leaders. God is the owner of the flock, the elders serve as under-shepherds.

The flock of God that is distributed into a multitude of congregations is entrusted to the pastors as stewards. In this passage Peter states that pastors are to exercise oversight in their respective contexts (v. 2) and to serve as examples to the flock (v. 3). Peter also emphasizes the manner in which this stewardship is to be carried out: willingly (as opposed to under constraint), eagerly (as contrasted with for selfish gain), and graciously (in contradistinction to a domineering style). Furthermore, there will come a time of accounting for these under-shepherds “when the chief Shepherd appears” (v. 4). Peter focuses on the reward that God will deliver on that day when the under-shepherds “receive the unfading crown of glory” (v. 4).

*The flock does not belong to the leader but to God.*

Pastors are responsible for the spiritual well-being of the saints entrusted to their oversight and care. This accountability is explicitly identified in Hebrews 13:17. This passage is not directed toward pastors but to the members of the congregations that the pastors lead, exhorting them to obey and submit to their spiritual leaders. The reason given for this is the leaders “are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” Accordingly, pastors exercise a stewardship of souls—of the lives of the members of God’s flock entrusted to them. Furthermore, these leaders are accountable for those souls and will give an account for them. This is a sobering reality for all who serve in the office of the ministry! Pastors of local congregations see to the spiritual welfare of all the members of their churches and do so with accountability to God. This means caring about each member’s growth in the faith and life of sanctification. It means being vigilant to seek those who are straying from the fold or are at risk of apostatizing. It means confronting and correcting those who are at risk of falling into the error of sin. It is a weighty responsibility, this stewardship of souls!

### **Stewardship of Personal Gifts**

In addition to the stewardship of the means of grace and of the people in his congregation, there is one more aspect of the pastor’s vocation and identity as a steward under the reign of Christ. That is his stewardship of his personal giftedness,

## *No one pastor excels in all the functions of pastoral ministry.*

abilities, and resources. This is expected of all Christians and is not distinctive only of those who fill the office of the pastoral ministry. But it applies also to those in the office, and so pastors will do well to give attention to this area of stewardship.

The Apostle Peter writes: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ” (1 Pt 4:10–11). This apostolic exhortation applies to all believers; there is no indication that Peter is addressing only pastors or church leaders. However, it certainly applies to the pastor who is the chief steward of a congregation. The two specific areas of giftedness in the passage—speaking for God and serving in God’s strength—are most visibly exemplified in the work of pastors. So pastors also must heed this admonition to be “good stewards of God’s varied grace.”

The scriptures are clear that God has given different gifts to different people.<sup>4</sup> No doubt this is what is meant in this passage when it speaks of God’s *varied* grace. Accordingly, different pastors will demonstrate different giftedness. Some will be more gifted in speaking ability in their roles as preachers and teachers. Others will show expertise in leadership as they recruit, equip, motivate, organize, mobilize, and direct people. Still other pastors will distinguish themselves as talented caregivers as they relate to the hurting and grieving. No one pastor excels in all the functions of pastoral ministry. In some areas he will distinguish himself as exceptionally talented. In other areas of ministry, his work will be appreciated but not out of the ordinary. In some tasks he may be weak and will need to see that others fill in where he is deficient. The management—the stewardship!—of such tasks must be attended to with an acute awareness of one’s own strengths and weaknesses.

What Peter emphasizes in this passage (1 Pt 4:10–11) is that ultimately these gifts derive from God. The words, “As each has received a gift,” indicate that the origin of the ability is not from oneself but from God. Peter also emphasizes that these manifold gifts are to be used for God’s purposes and glory (“in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ”). This infers stewardship. God is the source of the gift and he provides the strength to use the gift. The gift is entrusted to a person in order to achieve the purpose of God in advancing his mission and edifying his church. Therefore, pastors attend to the distinctive personal gifts with which God has entrusted them by virtue of their creation, redemption, and sanctification. In their identity and vocation as pastors, they are “good stewards of God’s varied grace.”

## ***The Pastoral Office: Overseeing the Stewardship of Others***

This essay examines the ways in which the pastor carries out his responsibilities as chief steward. Previously we considered the pastor's own vocation and identity as a steward in the kingdom of God. Now we turn to an investigation of the pastor's role in facilitating and overseeing the stewardship of others in the household of God. Simply put, the chief steward provides *guidance* to the congregation's members to live as stewards. He does that by modeling stewardship and by leading stewardship development.

### **Modeling Stewardship**

The Apostle Peter exhorts pastors to be "examples to the flock" (1 Pt 5:3). The Apostle Paul encouraged Timothy to "set an example for believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith, and in purity" (1 Tm 4:12). Similarly, Paul encouraged Titus: "In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity" (Ti 2:7). Pastors are called to exemplify the life in Christ to others, especially to those entrusted to their care. This includes modeling the life of stewardship as the chief steward of the congregation.

When Paul admonishes Titus to "show integrity" in his teaching, he means that the pastor's life and behavior should be consistent with what he preaches and teaches. Accordingly, as the pastor preaches and teaches about stewardship (which he must do if he is faithful to the whole counsel of scripture), he will model good stewardship in his personal and professional life. His behavior will align with his words. What does this look like in the behavior of the pastor?

First, it means the minister of the word will be a good steward of the word. He shares the life-giving word of Christ abundantly and not meagerly. He bears witness to the gospel in the various contexts of his life: home, neighborhood, marketplace, public square, leisure activities, and so on. In a natural and spontaneous manner, he will always be ready to give an answer to those who ask him for the reason of his hope (1 Pt 3:15). Furthermore, he conforms his life to the standards of God's will as revealed in the law of God.

*The pastor carries out various vocations as a neighbor, citizen, and friend.*

Second, the pastor models good stewardship in his vocational life and among the significant relationships of his life. Certainly, he is called to be a shepherd of God's flock, but he has other vocations as well. As a son, he shows honor to his parents throughout their lives, especially when they are elderly and in need of assistance. If he is married, he devotes himself to loving his wife "as Christ loved the church and gave

himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). If he is a father, he will devote himself to raising his children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). The pastor carries out various vocations as a neighbor, citizen, and friend. In each of these callings, he models faithful stewardship of roles, relationships, and responsibilities.

Third, the pastor models stewardship by making the best use of his talents and abilities (highlighted in the section on the stewardship of personal gifts). Many of these gifts will be employed in the official functions of pastoral ministry, but some will be used in other roles as well, including in the vocational contexts named above. For example, a pastor may possess gifts in administration which he employs serving as president of his neighborhood association as well as in managing the congregation.

Fourth, the chief steward serves as an example by taking care of his own body. Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians and to us, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:19–20). Paul emphasizes that God owns our physical bodies by virtue of both creation and redemption and so we are to honor him as stewards of what belongs to him. “God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. . . . For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him.”<sup>5</sup> The chief steward models faithful stewardship of the body by remaining sexually chaste, by engaging in healthy habits (of eating, drinking, exercising, engaging the mind, and sleeping), and by seeking appropriate medical care. He uses his body and mind to serve and obey the Lord and to offer him worship.

Fifth, the pastor is an example of good stewardship in his management of time. All of the arenas described above—vocations, relationships, exercise of talents, care for the body—take time. Time is a limited resource. Each human being is allotted 86,400 seconds each day. No creature can do all things at all times, but we can do what is most important in the time that is accorded to us. Thus, stewardship of time involves prioritizing responsibilities and activities.

Finally, the chief steward models faithful use of the material resources that God provides. This includes all of the physical belongings and financial goods at one’s disposal. The scriptures depict the responsible pastor as one who is not greedy (1 Tm 3:3, 6:9–10; Ti 1:7; 1 Pt 5:2; 2 Pt 2:3) but is content with his material goods and is generous (1 Tm 6:6–8; Heb 13:16). The chief steward models financial stewardship by avoiding unmanageable debt and by living within his means. He exemplifies support for the work of the church by contributing a significant proportion of his income to the congregation and then to other worthy causes which advance the gospel and serve the well-being of people. This he will share with cheerfulness and zeal. In so doing, he reflects the lavish generosity that God has shown in his creative and redemptive work.

Of course, in all of these venues of stewardship the pastor will to a degree fail. He will do none of this perfectly for he will “daily sin much.”<sup>6</sup> But where sin abounds,

grace abounds all the more. Therefore, he will model a life lived under the cross as one who is both saint and sinner. He will confess his failings and acknowledge his guilt before others and before God, and he will—regularly and eagerly—receive the word of forgiveness from his merciful Lord. As such, he models life as a recipient of the rich grace of God, one who stewards that grace by first receiving it himself.

## **Leading Stewardship**

The pastor not only models faithful management of the resources that God provides for body and soul, for church and world. The pastor also actively leads others in a consecrated life of stewardship. He does this through the means of educating, enlisting, equipping, and evaluating others in their roles as lifelong stewards.

## **Education**

The chief steward lays the foundation for engendering stewardship among members in the various contexts of *education* available to him. Primary among these is the context of preaching. As he preaches the whole counsel of God from the scriptures, he will proclaim to his listeners their calling to be stewards. He helps them recognize their identity as stewards by virtue of being creatures (first article) and saints (third article). He helps them to understand their responsibilities as stewards in the various vocations into which God has placed them. In the role of preacher, it is best to let the scriptural texts guide the topics related to stewardship. Rather than isolating stewardship to a single “Stewardship Sunday,” the preacher helps his hearers to understand whole-life stewardship manifested in the appointed sermon texts that are expounded on throughout the year. Of course, preaching should not be limited to providing information only. It will also involve proclamation (of God’s law, but especially of the Lord’s gospel), application, and exhortation of listeners to live as stewards in God’s kingdom.

Stewardship education occurs in other contexts as well. Through Bible studies, the pastor will help them to see how stewardship is integrated into much of scripture’s teaching. Stewardship themes can be highlighted in catechetical instruction of young and old in the teaching of the six chief parts of Christian doctrine. It is beneficial, on occasion, to include an educational course or seminar that focuses directly on the topic of stewardship.

## **Enlistment**

Whole-life stewardship is not an abstract concept. It is a lived experience. Accordingly, the chief steward of the congregation will help its members live out what they learn about their identity and responsibilities as stewards. Practical application of stewardship education begins with *enlistment*. Enlistment involves inviting people to participate in opportunities to serve God and others by using the members’ gifts

and abilities. These activities are carried out in the name of the congregation and in contexts of everyday life.

One resource for beginning this process is gift assessment. The pastor oversees efforts to help Christians recognize and identify their distinct areas of giftedness. These gifts are from God, both by virtue of creation (i.e., “natural gifts” or “first

*Whole-life stewardship is not an abstract concept. It is a lived experience.*

article gifts”) and sanctification (i.e., “spiritual gifts” or “third article gifts”).<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this process is that Christians may be mobilized according to the strengths with which God has created in them and in the design with which the Holy Spirit has equipped them. The intent is for people to

be good stewards of their talents and strengths. The Apostle Paul emphasizes that these gifts are always for the benefit of others—to serve one’s neighbors and to build up the church (Rom 12:3–8; 1 Cor 12:1–31). This process can be informal, involving an intuitive approach in which church members explore areas of service and are affirmed in their effectiveness to serve in various capacities. The process may also be formalized, involving an inventory or self-assessment instrument that identifies personality and ministry strengths that can be explored in experience and confirmed by the assessment of others. In the latter process, the pastor as *episkopos* of the congregation will oversee the resources and instruments used in order to ensure theological propriety.

Another activity that is critical to efforts for enlistment is recruitment. In this regard, the pastor will invite and encourage people to assume roles of service for which they are gifted. He will persuade congregational members who demonstrate competency (or who have the potential to be competent) to take responsibility for a role or a task that serves others and edifies the body of Christ. In this regard, it is best to recruit to a cause, not to an institutional position. In other words, show the importance and impact of the role. The pastor will also seek to demonstrate why the recruit is the best person to assume this responsibility. The chief steward should at the time of recruitment communicate clearly what the expectations and outcomes are. He should also identify what the recruit’s authority and accountability will be—all because the recruit himself is being called to be a steward of the congregation in this effort. At this point and throughout the completion of the effort, the pastor will affirm the work, express appreciation for the servant’s efforts, and provide guidance.

## **Equipping**

Paul writes in Ephesians 4:11–12, “And he [Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry,

for building up the body of Christ.” The pastor, the chief steward, is called to equip the saints. They have been educated to know their identity and responsibilities as stewards. They have been recruited to participate in efforts of service and mission. Now they must be equipped to carry out those efforts with faithfulness and fruitfulness.

First, God’s people are equipped to carry out their varied and significant vocations in life. This certainly includes their callings in the home or family. Thus, the pastor will see to it that the congregation offers training that aids spouses to love and support one another in marriage, parents to raise godly children, and children to mature in faith and discipleship. This effort includes activities in which Christians are empowered to carry out their callings as royal priests in their neighborhoods and workplaces. Workshops, seminars, courses, and especially mentor relationships can equip believers to be winsome witnesses to the gospel in these varied contexts.

Christians are also equipped for service in the many programs and initiatives carried out in the name of the congregation. These can involve roles of leadership and support in program areas and ministry teams. They may include involvement in missional communities sponsored by the church. A fourfold process of empowerment may be administered:

1. Inspiration – Recruiting the person to the ministry position by affirming giftedness, holding forth the value of the role, and promoting the mission and purpose of the effort.
2. Information – Orienting the steward to the theology, theory, and skills necessary to accomplish the effort faithfully and fruitfully.
3. Imitation – Providing a seasoned and fruitful worker to model the leadership or ministry role as a mentor.
4. Innovation – Releasing the steward to carry out a distinctive style of leadership or ministry under the guidance of the mentor and the oversight of the pastor or other professional staff person.

Effective equipping of the saints for the work of ministry does not happen without an intentional process of empowerment and guidance. The pastor, as chief steward, will see that systems are in place in the congregation for proactive and purposeful development of stewards.

## **Evaluation**

The final dynamic in the pastor’s role of leading stewardship in a congregation is that of *evaluation*. Recall that stewardship involves authority and accountability. Paul affirms, “It is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy” (1 Cor 4:2). Efforts to evaluate stewards and their work will address the need to hold them

trustworthy and accountable in their stewardship. Unfortunately, as Susan Beaumont observes, “Congregations are allergic to evaluation”<sup>8</sup> and it is indeed challenging to hold volunteers accountable for their work. Nonetheless, this is a critical task for effective stewardship to occur.

If evaluation is to take place, outcomes and expectations for the work of the steward must be identified. Goals and measures must be articulated and clarified. The worker should be allowed ample freedom and creativity in *how* those outcomes are achieved, although resources and policies will set some limitations and boundaries. The primary criterion for assessment will be how well the goals are accomplished.

In the official work of the church, a system of evaluation and accountability should be established. Every steward is to be accountable to an overseeing individual or board. During a project the steward gives reports on progress. If this occurs in the context of a mentor relationship, progress will be communicated naturally and regularly. At the end of the project, the overseer provides feedback to the steward on the goals and outcomes of the work. The overseer and the steward together reflect on what went well and what can be improved. Victories will be affirmed and celebrated. Thanks will be given to God and to the steward for a job well done. In addition, appropriate adjustments and the reshaping of goals and strategy will lead to enhanced fruitfulness in this area of stewardship in the future.

Overseeing all of this is the chief steward, the pastor. He is, after all, the *episkopos*, the one who supervises the doctrine and practice of the congregation. As the chief steward, he is accountable, both to God and to the congregation that has called him. The pastor will welcome evaluation of his work and counsel for improving leadership and ministry, for he recognizes that he also is a servant and steward. He has been authorized by God through the divine call and is accountable to the Lord, but he is also accountable to the body of believers that has called him to lead them. He too is a steward, indeed the chief steward, who must give an accounting for his stewardship.

### **Summary: The Pastor as Chief Steward**

The office and role of the pastor is integrally related to stewardship. He is a steward of the Lord’s means of grace—the word of God and the holy sacraments. He is a steward of the people entrusted to his care and supervision. He is a steward of the personal gifts and distinctive strengths that God has bestowed upon him. In his vocation as a pastor, the man who fills the office of the public ministry is a steward of these riches that have been entrusted to him by the Lord of creation, and in the congregation to which he has been called and in which he carries out ministry, he is the chief steward.

Of course, the pastor has other callings as well. He is the son of his parents. He may be a husband and a father. He is a neighbor, a citizen, a friend to others. He must manage his stewardship of all these varied vocations. In all these capacities he

is a steward, as any human creature is a steward of the Creator and as any baptized Christian is a steward of the Redeemer, but in his role as pastor in the Christian congregation, the pastor is the chief steward.

Stewardship involves authority and accountability. In the call by God to be an under-shepherd of God's flock, the pastor is authorized by and accountable to Christ, the Chief Shepherd. Since that call is mediated through a Christian congregation, the pastor is also authorized by this body of believers to lead ministry and mission on behalf of and with accountability to that congregation. In this way also the pastor is a steward.

Furthermore, in his role as chief steward the pastor leads the stewardship of others who are in the flock. He does this first by modeling faithful and fruitful stewardship in his various vocations. He is an "example to the flock" (1 Pt 5:3) by faithfully stewarding in his own life the following: the word of Christ, talents and abilities, body and health, time and activities, material resources and finances. The pastor is not perfect in this stewardship, and sins regularly in his callings. But as one who repents and receives God's forgiveness, he is an example of the work of God's grace in the life of a humble sinner.

Finally, the chief steward leads others in a consecrated life of stewardship. He guides them to greater maturity as stewards through the modes of education, enlistment, equipping, and evaluation. By this process Christians are formed and empowered to be faithful and productive stewards in the kingdom of God.

It is a daunting and challenging task to be the chief steward, but it is also a rich and holy privilege. It is a high honor to represent the King of Creation and to serve him in his ongoing work of restoring a fallen creation and of reconciling sinners to himself. When the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ, appears in glory, those who have served as his chief stewards will rejoice to hear these words: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Mt 24:21).

## Endnotes

- 1 "What is the Office of the Keys?" *Luther's Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 29.
- 2 Max DePree, *Leadership is an Art* (New York: Doubleday Business, 1989), 12. Emphasis mine.
- 3 A metonymy is a metaphor which becomes so common, widespread, and familiar in its usage that users become unaware of its metaphorical aspect.
- 4 See, for example, Romans 12:3–8; 1 Corinthians 12:1–31.
- 5 Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism," *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 354–355.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 358.

- 7 One caution is in order here. One ought not to make an artificial distinction between these kinds of gifts. For example, someone might be naturally gifted as a musician and use this gift in the worship of God. Another person might be naturally gifted as a teacher, and use this gift to teach the word of God to teenagers. In these cases the work of God in creation and sanctification is integrated into holistic service to God and others.
- 8 Susan Beaumont, *Inside the Large Congregation* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2011), 220.

# God's World of Daily Wonders

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*“If you closely examined a kernel of grain in the field, you would die of wonder.”<sup>1</sup>*

**M**artin Luther is best known for extolling the person and work of Jesus Christ like few others before him. Less well known and thus less appreciated is the way in which he also expressed an exuberant sense of wonder for the first article

world as God's creation. In other words, Luther not only extolled the benefits of Christ as our Lord, he extolled the first article creation over which Jesus is Lord.<sup>2</sup>

Now if I believe in God's Son and bear in mind that He became man, all creatures will appear a hundred times more beautiful to me than before. Then I will properly appreciate the sun, the moon, the stars, trees, apples, pears, as I reflect that He is Lord over and the center of all things.<sup>3</sup>

## **Editor's note**

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As Luther worked through the ramifications of the gospel during the 1520s, he “discovered worldliness as a theological category,” and thus lived “entirely out of joy in creation.”<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that he romanticized life in this world. Luther was more than capable of critiquing it.

In fact, Luther in his day and we in our day may more often than not conclude that “the world is going to hell in a hand basket.” After all, the world in which we live is filled with terrorism and wars, famines and poverty, torture and beheadings, genocide and persecutions, sicknesses and diseases, broken friendships and divorce, domestic abuse, violence and rape, murder, persecution, creatures going extinct. Given this litany of ills, it is understandable if Christians often do not feel at home in such a world. And well they shouldn’t. After all, we are in the world but not “of the world” (John 15:19). And Luther often groups together the “world, the devil, and our flesh” as our enemies.

Then there is the issue of our daily lives within creation. Many of us find ourselves so busy running from one task to another in an effort to secure our lives that our lives become fragmented and stressed. Along with this, everything seems so ordinary and common that we find life tedious and mundane. We perhaps find ourselves living out our lives much like the main character in the movie, *Groundhog Day*. It is a daily repetition of the same thing day after day. As a result, we become so jaded and cynical that we may diagnose our existence as lives of “quiet desperation.” And thus we find ourselves constantly needing to be entertained and requiring ever more novelty in order to feel alive.

Yet in the midst of all this, we confess in the first article of the Creed (“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth”) that there is an underlying reality to the world that is more fundamental than all the evil we see or the dreary ordinariness of life that we experience. This world remains God’s world. Luther comments on Genesis, “If you ponder in your heart the whole course of nature and of this whole life . . . you will find more good than bad things and you will also see that a very small part is subjected to the power of the devil” (*LW* 6:90). Similarly, he comments on Jonah that the experience of creation gives a positive witness to all people so that God may be regarded as “kind, gracious, merciful, and benevolent. And that is a bright light indeed” (*LW* 19:54).

As God’s world, it remains capable of awakening wonder in God’s human creatures. This is not a minor matter. In fact, philosopher Jesse Prinz suggests that “wonder might be humanity’s most important emotion.”<sup>5</sup> Why? Three factors come into play.

First, wonder draws us out of ourselves. Something engages our senses, catches us by surprise, and captivates us. Wow! It’s like Agur’s astonishment in Proverbs 30:24–28. And so we pause to stare and gape in astonishment and delight. Ethical philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, points out that there is a self-forgetful quality to

wonder. For wonder, “responds to the pull of the object, and one might say that in it the subject is maximally aware of the value of the object, and only minimally aware, if at all, of its relation to her own plans. That is why it is likely to issue in contemplation, rather than in any sort of action toward the object.”<sup>6</sup>

For this reason Nussbaum suggests that wonder is the one human emotion that is non-eudaimonistic. That is, it draws us out of our self-interest, self-absorption, and egotism. It responds to “others in their own right.”<sup>7</sup>

Second, wonder opens us up to seeing the world as having its own integrity apart from human utility. It does so by kindling curiosity about the object of our wonder. In our astonishment we take some time to contemplate. We may wonder what it is like to hover in the air moving up and down or side to side like a hummingbird, or what it might be like to dive deep into the ocean’s dark depths like a blue whale. In this way, wonder “helps move distant objects within the circle of a person’s scheme of ends . . . seeing others as part of one’s own circle of concern.”<sup>8</sup> And thus she suggests “that no emotion matches wonder in its capacity to evoke true empathy or compassion.”<sup>9</sup>

Third, wonder gives rise to awe or reverence akin to Psalm 8. Wonder “elicits our prolonged engagement with life, our sustained desire to connect with the ultimate meanings and purposes of the surrounding world.”<sup>10</sup> It prompts us to contemplate “how the parts of life fit into some larger whole.”<sup>11</sup> And so, in opening us up to the world, wonder also opens us up to the mysterious and the transcendent. Even those who consider themselves atheists will acknowledge that wonder makes them “spiritual” even if not religious.<sup>12</sup> Prinz admits, “Atheist that I am, it took some time for me to realize that I am a spiritual person.”

So why does creation evoke such wonder in both Christians and non-Christians alike? A good part of the answer lies in the truth that we are creatures who find ourselves in a world that we did not make and thus in a world that is ultimately beyond our comprehension and control. Here Luther’s quote about the kernel of grain again becomes important. “If you closely examined a kernel of grain in the field, you would die of wonder.” But then he adds, “For God’s works are not like our works.” God’s works are always original whereas our works are derivative and imitative. G. K. Chesterton puts it well, “God is that which can make something out of nothing. Man (it may truly be said) is that which can make something out of anything.”<sup>13</sup>

While the creation evokes wonder in that which we don’t understand, it does not show us the person or identity of the creator. People can express appreciation and gratitude for the beauty and goodness that they experience. But they don’t know to whom they should express such gratitude. Again, G. K. Chesterton observes, “The worst moment for the atheist is when he is really thankful and has nobody to thank.”<sup>14</sup> Alister McGrath explains that it is ultimately “a question of combining close observation of the world with the right explanatory framework.”<sup>15</sup>

The Christian story (of which the Creed is plot summary) provides such a

framework for contemplating the world. And it is one of epic proportions from the very beginning! It tells the story of the Creator who freely creates a universe, sustains it, recovers it, restores it, and makes it new. For our purposes, I will rely on the insight of the seventeenth-century theologian, John Gerhard, who declared that there were two chief works of God: the first “was the creation of the entire universe;” the second was “the restoration of the human race.”<sup>16</sup>

### **The Wonder of Creation’s Existence**

Of the two works of God cited by Gerhard (creation and restoration), one could argue that creation could be considered God’s foremost and greatest work. Everything begins there. And as the Old Testament scholar, Iain Provan, notes, “Our understanding of the beginning of every story deeply influences our reading of the entire story.”<sup>17</sup> And what the beginning of this story shows us is that there is nothing ordinary about this world or our life within it. Why? Because God chose to make it. McGrath observes that once the world of animals, forests, people, landscapes are “seen as God’s creation, it can never be seen as ordinary again.”<sup>18</sup> Provan goes a step further and declares that this world is not divine, but it is sacred, precisely “because it is a creation,”<sup>19</sup> the personal expression of a free, creative, gracious, and devoted God.

### **The Beginning of Creation**

Gerhard proceeds to express the far-reaching insight that creation is the very first activity of God directed away from himself (*opera ad extra*). He writes that it “is the first work in which God revealed Himself externally as he came forth from his hidden throne.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, God’s activities interior to himself (*opera ad intra*) existed from eternity. The Son is eternally begotten; the Spirit eternally proceeds. These occur within the Trinity. But the very first thing God does outside himself is to create the entire first article universe that we now perceive through seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting! “Everything came from God.”<sup>21</sup> The ramifications are incredibly far reaching.

First, the act of creating out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) manifests God’s gracious character. The philosopher asks, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” The theologian answers, “Because God chose to create.” Elizabeth Achtemeier rightly notes, “The wondrous fact about it all, however, is that none of it had to be. God did not have to make the world or the universe.”<sup>22</sup> God did not create us in order to complete himself or take care of his needs—unlike the near eastern deities of the ancient world. Instead, he created the world as a gift for his creatures.<sup>23</sup> It as an act of lavish generosity or, as Luther puts it, an act of “fatherly divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me.” We are not entitled to anything.

Second, that act of creating the universe out of nothing establishes the Creator-creature distinction, which is the worldview that the entire biblical story assumes. God is first and foremost a Creator . . . the Creator. The act of creating characterizes

what God is and does. Creating is what God does. And so the activity of creating is what defines God as God throughout the Bible. We are creatures within creation. This is who we are. And thus the confession that God has created everything out of nothing defines the relationship of the Creator and creature. God is the absolute giver of all things and we are the receiver of his gifts. And so it affirms the complete and continuing dependence of the universe upon God.<sup>24</sup>

Third, and perhaps taken for granted because it should be so obvious, MacKenzie notes that, for Luther, this teaching not only affirms the radical dependence of creation upon God (as was traditional), but that it defines the place and boundaries of the Creator-creature interaction. That God created everything implies that it is only within this creation and through this creation that God relates to us and interacts with us. It is within creation and through creation that God bestows his gifts. And it is only from within this creation and through this creation that we encounter God and interact with God. We cannot and do not deal with him apart from or outside of this creation. To seek otherwise is to transcend our creatureliness and invert the Creator-creature relationship.<sup>25</sup>

Luther calls the first article of the Creed then the “loftiest article” of the faith. Now that may seem rather surprising as we might expect him to say such a thing about the second article. So why the first article? Most importantly, Luther’s “entire treatment of God’s intervention on behalf of sinners through the incarnation presumed the person of God as almighty Creator and Lord.”<sup>26</sup> Creation comes first and sets the table for all that follows. God is the Creator before he is the redeemer just as we are creatures before we are sinners. The one who creates is the one who redeems. And he does so from a particular place within creation, namely, the cross.

And so the Christian story encourages us to see all of God’s work as part and parcel of his creative activity. After all, the first thing that the Bible says about God is that God creates (“In the beginning, God created . . .” Gn 1:1). And the last thing the Bible says about God is that he creates (“Behold, I make all things new . . .” Rv 21:5). Creating encompasses the full scope of God’s activity. God continually creates new things (*creare semper novum facere*).<sup>27</sup>

When considered this way, the story of creation can be unpacked in five movements. The first movement encompasses the *creatio originalis*. It refers to the creation as it existed in its pristine condition prior to the fall. The second is *creatio continua*. It refers to God’s continuous creative activity of preserving the world. The third act is the *creatio libera*. It focuses on the liberation of the creation in Christ. It is the fulcrum of the story. The fourth act, *creatio renovata*, deals with renewing creation (sanctification is an ongoing act of creation) even as it looks forward to the final act, the *creatio nova* (new creation). The story of God then is ultimately the story of his creation. Creation is not simply the prologue to the story. It is what the story is all about!

*“Look at a grain of wheat in the field...” (Luther)*



## The Ongoing Creation

God didn't stop with his initial creation and retire after the sixth day. We confess that God continues to be present and active within his creation. The Nicene Creed speaks of God as *pantokrator* (almighty), which picks up the dynamic of God's active ruling over creation. To quote a popular spiritual song, "He's got the whole world in his hands!" But Luther goes even further to state, "Creation is not something past, but something *present*."<sup>28</sup> God is always creating.<sup>29</sup> For Luther there is no sharp line of distinction between God's first creation and his present creating.<sup>30</sup> He remains both present and active within his creation for the sake of his creation.

And yet, we rarely speak of the world as having any religious or spiritual significance. It's almost as if everything were not constantly related to God by virtue of being God's creation—even though it is his air, water, earth, etc.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps we are afraid of pantheistic tendencies of eco-feminist mother earth theologies that confuse the Creator with his creation. Or perhaps we conclude (and this is most likely the case) that since God has made himself known to us and for us definitively in his word and Sacraments, why bother with something that is less "clear"?

Ironically, it seems that Luther developed a profound and breath-taking vision of God's presence in creation as a direct result of his battles with the Sacramentarians (who could not comprehend the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper).<sup>32</sup> They could not imagine how Christ can be bodily present, "whole and undivided," in the elements of the Lord's Supper.<sup>33</sup>

The debates over the Lord's Supper compelled Luther to grapple with what it meant for Christ to sit at the right hand of God and at the same time to be present in a piece of bread. Luther argued that the right hand of God is not a place but a biblical way of talking about "the almighty power of God," which is everywhere (*LW* 37:63–64).<sup>34</sup> We can't separate God from his power or presence. God is the one who creates, effects, and preserves all things within creation. And he does not do this from a distance or through intermediaries. "If he is to create or preserve, however, he must be present and must make and preserve his creation both in its innermost and outermost aspects" (*LW* 37:58). And so, God upholds the entire world by virtue of his own presence within the world. Were he to remove himself from his creation, the world would unravel.<sup>35</sup>

Luther thus affirms a paradox. On the one hand, Luther contended that God is so transcendent that he cannot be circumscribed or contained by anything in creation. On the other hand, he is present in every little thing within creation, even in the "tiniest leaf" (*LW* 37:57). More descriptively, God is "present in every single creature in

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significance.*

*Every moment of creation's existence depends upon the creating word and work of God.*

its innermost and outermost being, on all sides, through and through, below and above, before and behind, so that nothing can be more truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power" (*LW* 37:58). This was perhaps even difficult for his followers to absorb. In a Table Talk, it was noted, "When we were debating whether

God truly is in each and every minute creature, in the grass, in a tree, etc., he [Dr. L], responded, 'It is so'" (*LW* 54:32; No. 240).

Luther's view of God's omnipresence serves in part as the basis for his view of Christ's incarnation. "God himself is personally present in all things, without which presence even God could not have become [human] nor one person made of divinity and humanity" (*LW* 37:63). Luther also applies this to Jesus' glorified human nature. He is "lord of all things, has all things in his hand, and is present everywhere" also according to his human nature (*LW* 36:342). In comparison with this, then, his presence in the Supper is "trivial" (*LW* 37:59). In other words, "Jesus Christ can be present in, with, and under bread and wine only because the Creator is in, with and under all creatures."<sup>36</sup>

Even though Luther celebrates God's presence everywhere within creation, it does not mean that we should seek him there for our salvation. Luther's view of God's presence may seem to share a common rhetoric with someone like Giordano Bruno, but his view differs significantly from Bruno's pantheistic ideas. And so, even though "I can say of all creatures, 'There is God, or God is in it,' I cannot say 'This is God himself'" (*LW* 37:62). God is powerfully and actively present within creation, but God is also concealed or hidden within creation with the result that no one can discern his person or will "merely from his presence."<sup>37</sup>

So it is one thing for God to be present. It is another for him to choose to be present for us.

Although he [God] is present in all creatures, and I might find Him in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope, for He is certainly there, yet he does not wish that I seek him there apart from the Word, and cast myself into the fire or the water, or hang myself on the rope. He is present everywhere, but he does not wish that you grope for him everywhere. Grope rather where the Word is, and there you will lay hold of him in the right way (*LW* 36:342).

He is present for us when he adds his Word and says, "Here you can find me." When you have the word, you can grasp and have him with certainty (*LW* 37:68).

Luther's attention to God's revelation in the word does not mean that God's presence in nature should be ignored or denied. It's just that we need to distinguish between God's creative and powerful presence within nature and his saving and personal presence in the elements of nature that he chose for saving us. We encounter his creative presence every day in, with, and under his creation. But fallen human creatures cannot see who the Creator is or what kind of a God he is from creation alone. Whereas when we encounter his saving presence in word and sacrament, we encounter the person and will of the Creator.

For Luther, God is not only present in creation; he is continually active within creation for the benefit of his creation. God is no "*deus otiosus*, the idle, inactive god who keeps his hands on his lap, which is what the Epicurean gods do." God is the *deus actuosissimus*, "the most active God."<sup>38</sup> As such, God remains faithful to his creation. He does not let go of his creation or give up on his creation. Instead, he remains with it and works within it in order to bring it to the goal for which God envisioned it. Even here and now "no kernel of grain or tiny leaf grows unless God gives it growth" (WA 24:58, 13ff). In other words, God creates anew every day!

Every moment of creation's existence depends upon the creating word and work of God. The creative word of blessing and promise that God spoke into the earth and into every creature continues to take effect to this day in the same way that the words of institution remain effective (FC VII, 75). "God remains with his creation, is effective in it, continually allows new animals and human beings to be born and continually grants new beginnings, and in this way preserves creation."<sup>39</sup> Luther collapses the past and present when he states, "we Christians know that with God creating and preserving are one and the same" (LW 4:136). In fact, everything was made when the world began but not everything came into view at the same time (LW 1:76).

The debate with the Sacramentarians provided "the context in which Luther developed his conception of 'daily miracles,'"<sup>40</sup> for they found it incongruous with the way in which God works. But Luther urges,

Look at a grain of wheat in the field, and tell me how it comes about that the stalk grows out of the earth from a single seed and bears so many kernels on the ear, and gives each one its own form. Moreover, in a single kernel there are many, many miraculous works, which they neither perceive nor pay any heed to (LW 36:339).

Luther contends that the Sacramentarians cannot affirm the miracle of Christ's bodily presence in the Lord's Supper because they are blind to "the countless miracles" like this that Christ performs everyday within the creation (LW 36:343). And yet, "anyone who examines a creature rightly" (LW 36:340) will find many such miracles within creation.

Luther will even declare that the miracles of everyday life are greater than those

that we consider to be rare and unusual. For example, people marvel over how Christ healed the man who could not hear or speak. Yet that miracle pales in comparison to “what God does every day” when many enjoy good sight and hearing for fifty or more years! “By this little miracle God stirs us up to recognize the great miracles.”<sup>41</sup> And like Augustine, who contended that God’s miracle of creating a cornfield from a few grains is a greater miracle than feeding the five thousand, Luther will also argue that “the growth of the fruits of the field and the preservation of various kinds” is “as great as the multiplication of the loaves” in the wilderness” (*LW* 4:5).

Along the same lines, the biblical scholar, Elizabeth Achtemeier argues that the Bible does not understand miracles “as the disruption of or interference in the orderly laws of nature.” Instead, she argues, the “real ‘miracles’” in the Bible “are the faithfulness of God in his working with earth, skies, and seas, and his constant care and concern for all, including human beings.”<sup>43</sup> Wendell Berry writes in a similar manner, “I see that the life of this place is always emerging beyond expectation or prediction or typicality, given to the world minute by minute, only once, never to be repeated. And then is when I see that this life is a miracle, absolutely worth having, absolutely worth saving.”<sup>44</sup>

Creation is thus not static, it becomes God’s partner. God works through his creation for the sake of his creation. In the Large Catechism, Luther states, “Creatures are the hands, channels, instruments through which we receive all things, so that all we receive we receive from him through creatures” (LC I, 26).<sup>45</sup> Luther speaks of how all the creatures and temporal blessings were given to serve us and to help us see God’s goodness.<sup>46</sup> Luther expressed this vividly in a catechism sermon in the 1530s when he encouraged children to open their ears with faith and hear the creatures. So when you see a cow in the field, imagine it saying, “Rejoice and be glad, I bring you milk and butter from God.”<sup>47</sup> Conversely, he works through humans (babies are created but God’s work is hidden). Gregersen points out that this is one of the things that makes creation a wondrous mystery, “not because God is behind creation, but because God is working from within creation.”<sup>48</sup>

As the Creator, then, God is the lavish giver of all good things.<sup>49</sup> These gifts are given to the righteous and the unrighteous alike and witness to the goodness of the Creator (Acts 14). God brings forth new life each and every day. And he provides for that life each and every day. Gregersen observes that it is rare to find within the tradition “expressions of the view that also the Father, the source of all divine life (*fons deitatis*), gives Himself to creation.” But we find that exactly so in the Large Catechism and his Great Confession, “a particularly beautiful articulation of the threefold divine self-giving, of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to the world of creation.”<sup>50</sup>

### **The Wonder of Our Restoration**

As part of his first great work of creating the entire universe, God created two unique creatures—human creatures—whom he raised from the earth along with the myriad

of other fellow creatures of the earth that he had made and into which he breathed the breath of life. But God endowed these human creatures with special gifts and privileges that made them unique in all of creation. He made them capable of “appreciative wonder”<sup>51</sup> so that they could share his delight in the creation. And he gave them a special honor in sharing the Creator’s benevolent dominion over the earth so that all life would flourish. And they enjoyed *Zufriedenheit*, contentment and satisfaction with their place as creatures among all the other creatures and with a world that God had made to be their home. But the subsequent actions of these unique creatures made in God’s image would ultimately lead to God’s second great work—the restoration of the human race.

### Restored as Creatures

God’s human creatures were not and are not content with the gift of his creation. They more often than not see it as nothing special.

[Most people] are so accustomed to [the works of God in nature]; they are as permeated with them as an old house is with smoke; they use them and wallow around in them like a sow in an oats sack. Oh, they say, is it so marvelous that the sun shines? That fire heats? That water contains fish? That hens lay eggs? That the earth yields grain? That a cow bears calves? That a woman gives birth to children? Why, this happens every day! You dear dolt Hans, must it be insignificant because it happens daily? . . . If God created all other women and children of bone, as He did Eve, and but one woman were able to bear children, I maintain that the whole world, kings and lords, would worship her as a divinity. But now that every woman is fruitful, it passes for nothing . . . Is it not vexing to see the accursed ingratitude and blindness of mankind? [We take these things for granted . . .]<sup>52</sup>

Without faith, one takes for granted the common and despises the everyday gifts of life. Human creatures thus refused to live as creatures and sought to live on their own. And so for Luther, the battle with Erasmus was not one of the externalization of religion versus the interior life of religion. It was one of the exaltation of the human creature.<sup>53</sup> Luther writes,

If we believed God the creator, “we would also act accordingly, and not swagger about and boast and brag as if we had life, riches, power, honor, and such things of ourselves, as if we ourselves were to be feared and served. This is the way the wretched, perverse world acts, drowned in its blindness, misusing all the blessings and gifts of God solely for its own pride, greed, pleasure, and enjoyment, and

never once turning to God to thank him or acknowledge him as Lord or Creator (LC II, 21).

And with the exaltation of the human creature, the wider creation became viewed as an entitlement rather than a gift.

In the attempt to exalt ourselves, we ruined his good creation. Luther developed this idea with his theology of the cross in the Heidelberg dissertation. He argued that we use the good things of creation in the worst way. Erik Herrmann notes, “Though one must affirm the inherent goodness of creation, Luther notes that without the perspective brought on by the cross, we will use the best things in the worst way, i.e., we will ascribe divinity to them.”<sup>54</sup> So it is not that creation is bad. To the contrary, “the earth is indeed innocent and committed no sin” (*LW* 1). Though creation is good, our misuse of it defiles it. And so the earth has had to endure the curse placed upon it because of human sin.

And so in the midst of Luther’s joy in God’s creation, “we hear an undertone of sadness—a tone different from the contemporary Renaissance mysticism” or even of Giordano Bruno’s pantheistic religion . . .”<sup>55</sup> “It is from man’s use of the world, not from God’s good creation, that ills and sorrows arise.”<sup>56</sup> For the exaltation of the self closes us off from others and from creation. It “dislodges our creaturely nature” and our role within creation.<sup>57</sup> Human creatures find themselves surrounded by hostility, both that of the Creator and that of creation. In the end, this leaves the human creature isolated and lonely within creation.<sup>58</sup>

Here’s where John Gerhard’s observation about the second great work of God, the “restoration of the human race,” comes into play. God did not give up on us or let us go. Given that the problem began with us, so the solution begins with us. But our restoration did not imply a transcending of our earthly existence. This is significant. Other religions would have us transcend our creation (and our creatureliness) by becoming divine. Not so Christianity. It does not seek to get us out of our skin and translate us into spiritual beings or little gods.

But to what does Christ restore us? The obvious answer is to God. As seen earlier, however, we do not relate to God apart from our own creatureliness or apart from the wider creation. And so Christ restores us to God by restoring us to our creatureliness!” Faith restores us to that relationship for which God first created us, a relationship in which God as the Creator gives life, and we as creatures receive life. Nestingen puts it well: “We are graced by the gospel of Jesus Christ, who recreates, making us creatures again—people of the earth, fit for God, the neighbor, and the earth itself.”<sup>59</sup> Thus Nestingen rightly observes, “To be glad and content to be a creature—that is redemption!”<sup>60</sup>

God restores us to creation by means of his creation. Just as he made us from the earth, cursed us from the earth, now he restores us by means of the earth. And so the Son of God becomes a human creature. And in his earthly body he suffers and dies.

And with his earthly body he rises from the dead. Jesus is declared Lord as a man—not Lord of some purely spiritual realm, but Lord of creation, the earth. As the Lord, he takes hold of water, bread, and wine, and uses them for the gospel. In doing so, he expands our horizons to include not only creation but the forgiveness of sins, water rich in grace, wine and bread that is body and blood. According to Nestingen, “He goes to the root to emphasize that it is God who is at work in Word and sacraments to reclaim creature and creation.”<sup>61</sup>

## Restored to Creation

As the gift of faith restores us to our creatureliness, it also restores us to life within creation. As Santmire expresses, the gospel and faith “opens up the eyes of the believer to new and glorious perceptions of God’s creative activity in nature and of the wonders of nature itself . . . in other words, [redeemed existence] brings with it a new and more vital relationship with nature.”<sup>62</sup> Luther expresses it poetically in a Table Talk:

[We] are presently living in the dawn of the age to come [future life]; for we are beginning to acquire once again a knowledge of the creatures that we lost through Adam’s fall. Now we can look at the creatures much more correctly, more than at any time under the papacy. But Erasmus is not interested in and is hardly concerned about how the fruit forms in the womb of the mother, how it is given shape and is made; he is also hardly concerned about the marriage relationship, as majestic as that is. But we begin, by the grace of God, to recognize his majestic works and wonders even within the little blossoms, when we reflect how mighty and good God is. Therefore we praise and glorify him and thank him. We recognize the might of his Word in his creatures, how powerful it is. For he spoke and it came to be [Psalm 33:9] — even through a peach stone. Even though its outer shell is very hard, in its own proper time it must open up because of its soft center which is inside. Erasmus passes over this artfully and looks at creatures the way a cow looks at a new [barn] door.<sup>63</sup>

The dawn of the future life places our life on earth in the time between Christ’s resurrection and his return . . . a time when we can see more clearly the wonders of creation.

The metaphor of the dawn is a helpful image for seeing how the gospel’s promise of the new creation illumines the creation in this age even as it draws us forward. First, the dawn is a period of twilight when the sun is rising but remains just below the horizon. It is a soft indirect light in that it shines up into the sky and there is refracted and scattered by the atmosphere onto the earth. Second, the world remains enshrouded in the grayness of twilight in the dawn. Shadows still lie over the earth

even as the light grows brighter. But it is creation in which God continues to work in spite of the death and decay that suffuses it. Third, with the dawn we expect to see the sunrise and in the noonday sun we expect to see the creation even more clearly and to be impressed even more by it.

### **The First Light of Dawn**

In his quote about the “dawn of the future life,” Luther observes that we have begun to acquire “a correct view of creatures . . .” What does he mean by that? We get a hint in a later paragraph when he says that we begin to see them as the wonderful works of God as we “reflect how mighty and good God is.” In the gospel we see God for the Creator that he is. He is no longer the terrorizing God of thunderstorms and “rustling leaves” within nature; he is the God who lavishes his goodness upon the world. And so, in the gospel, we now know who the Creator is and what kind of a Creator he is.

By turning us to the Creator, the promise and faith also turns us toward his creation.<sup>64</sup> The light of dawn casts light upon a world that gives us eyes to look through the darkness and see “the miracles of creation.”<sup>65</sup> Luther observes that in Psalm 104 the Psalmist “sings and takes great delight in God’s creatures, so wondrously fashioned and so beautifully coordinated. But who pays any heed to this and views them as such? Only faith and the Spirit.”<sup>66</sup>

In this connection, Luther’s comment about Erasmus (and with him, the papacy) becomes significant. Luther contends that Erasmus shows little interest in creaturely things, such as how a peach pit opens up and grows into a peach tree. As a humanist, Erasmus is more interested in Plato’s eternal forms than what is going on down here on earth. And so Erasmus stares at creatures as a cow at a new gate, whereas Luther (perhaps due in part to his nominalist training) has his eyes on the earth, especially the particularities and small things of creation.

For Luther, the gospel first illumines the familiar and the common around our home and yard as the work of a gracious Creator. He focuses on the kernel of grain in the field, the peach pit, the little flower that blooms. He delights in the small and delicate creatures such as flowers and leaves<sup>67</sup> as the magnificent works of God. “We possess such beautiful creatures; but we pay little attention to them, because they are so common.”<sup>68</sup> He carefully observes the spider scampering across the water of a pond and notices details about the sparrows and the lilies.

*The dawn of the gospel also enables us see beyond our house and yard to look upon a larger, more alien, wondrous, and wild world.*

The dawn of the gospel also enables us see beyond our house and yard to look upon a larger, more alien, wondrous, and wild world. It is the world of Job, a world of fellow creatures that includes ravens and lions, of wild goats and strong horses, of the Behemoth and the Leviathan. God rejoices and delights in them, almost to the point boasting of them as he shows them all to Job. Faith opens us up to see other creatures as the works of God, creatures that have little to do with us and even less concern for our lives.

## Semi-Darkness of Dawn

Although the gospel restores us to a creaturely faith that sees the wondrous works of Christ in creation, it does not give us a romanticized view of the world. The world remains mysterious and God's ways within it often confound us. We see suffering and death in creation. We see wantonness and waste in creation as one crane chick kills its sibling. Our bodies grow old and frail. We hear the groaning and longing of creation. But again, the eyes of faith see this through the theology of the cross, namely, that often God works under the contrary.

C. S. Lewis captures something of this when he points out that Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection is the key chapter for making sense of the entire story.

Now, what is the missing chapter in this case, the chapter that Christians are offering? It is the story of the Incarnation—the story of a descent and resurrection . . . [This] is the missing chapter in this novel, the chapter on which the whole plot turns . . . that God really has dived down into the bottom of creation, and has come up bringing the whole redeemed nature on His shoulders. The miracles that have already happened are, of course, as Scripture so often says, the first fruits of that cosmic summer which is presently coming on. Christ has risen, and so we shall rise.<sup>69</sup>

Lewis goes on to show how this descent and ascent of Christ sheds light on our experience in this world.

One of those ways identified by Lewis has to do with life and death. In an evolutionary framework, one might look about the world and conclude that death is the key to life. It isn't. What we see is that life is given again and again in the face of endangering threats. God continues to bring forth life daily in the midst of and in the face of the constant threats of death. We witness the perpetual renewal of life in the midst of its perpetual perishing.<sup>70</sup> The crocus that pokes through the winter snows. Life continues to come forth. In Christ, we see that this is God's way of working. When seen through the lens of Christ's death and resurrection, we realize that life gets the final word.

## **Anticipating the Full Light of the New Day**

The light of dawn not only shows us anew the wonders of this creation; it also brings the expectation of the full light of the noonday sun when we can see God's creation (and new creation) most clearly and be even more astonished by it. These wonders in turn herald the new age to come in light of the gospel that promises, "I will make all things new." Luther describes that time in vivid terms: "Then there will also be a new heaven and earth, the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold . . . That will be a broad and beautiful heaven and a joyful earth, much more beautiful and joyful than paradise was" (*LW* 12:119, 121).

In the meantime, this present creation awakens a wonder within us that delights in this world as God's creation but also excites a longing for the new age to come. Not surprisingly, Christians have especially connected the resurrection and the future life to all things related to spring. Spring brings with it the hopes of a bright summer. The rhythm of death and life is not an endless repetition. The time will come when life has the final word. In the end, this world dies—but Christ makes it anew. This ever new life of this age foreshadows the resurrection and the new age to come.

### **Conclusion**

The Christian story opens us up to experiencing the world as a wondrous gift of God. And so, as creedal Christians, we embrace the wonder of this present creation as our home in which God daily and richly gives life in the midst of the ever present shadow of death . . . and we do so confident that, just as Christ has triumphed over death, he will one day bring forth a wondrous new creation.

## Endnotes

- 1 Martin Luther, "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics" (1536), *LW* 36:344.
- 2 See Martin E. Marty, "Creativity and Creation: A Lutheran Context for the Arts," *The Cresset* 47, no. 4 (February 1984): 5–7.
- 3 Martin Luther, "Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1–4," *LW* 22:496.
- 4 Johannes Schwanke and John R. Betz, "Luther on Creation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (2002): 10. Schwanke notes that, by receiving the world as a promised gift, Luther was able to "extricate himself from the monastic denial of life." See also Niels Henrik Gregersen, "Grace in Nature and History: Luther's Doctrine of Creation Revisited," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 19–29. He writes, "Luther depicts God's work of creation after the model of God's work of salvation, so that the first article of faith (about creation) is permeated by the insights that flow out the gospel message of the second and third articles of faith (about the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit)," (20). Reimann points out, "Koeberl summarizes Luther's position this way: Whoever looks into the heart of God in His Son can look on His face in Creation." Henry W. Reimann, "Luther on Creation: A Study in Theocentric Theology," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 24, no. 1 (January 1953): 34.
- 5 <http://aeon.co/magazine/psychology/why-wonder-is-the-most-human-of-all-emotions>. I am relying here and in the next few paragraphs on Prinz's three components of wonder. See also, William P. Brown, *Wisdom's Wonders: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) for a comprehensive treatment of wonder.
- 6 Marth C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals in Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 54.
- 7 Nussbaum, 53–54.
- 8 Nussbaum, 55.
- 9 Robert Fuller, "Wonder and the Religious Sensibility: A Study in Religion and Emotion," *Journal of Religion* 86, no. 3 (July 2006): 384.
- 10 Fuller, 383.
- 11 Fuller, 370.
- 12 Spirituality can be defined as "the awareness of and perceived relationship to a self-transcendent reality." I am indebted to Tony Cook for this definition.
- 13 G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (Peru, IL.: Sherwood, Sugden and Company, 1942), 35.
- 14 G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 61.
- 15 Alister McGrath, *The Reenchantment of Nature: The Denial of Religion and the Ecological Crisis* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 182.
- 16 Johann Gerhard, *On Creation and Predestination. Theological Commonplaces: VIII–XI* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 10.
- 17 Iain Provan, *Seriously Dangerous Serious Religion: What the Old Testament Really Says and Why it Matters* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 14.
- 18 McGrath, 49.
- 19 Provan, 32.
- 20 Gerhard, 10.
- 21 Elizabeth Achtemeier, Nature, *God and Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 79.
- 22 Achtemeier, 28.
- 23 Provan, 79
- 24 See Jaroslav Pelikan, "Creation and Causality in the History of Christian Thought," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 32, no. 2 (March 1990): 10–16. Johannes Schwanke concludes that creatio ex nihilo is "the basic matrix of his dealings with humanity and the world." Johannes Schwanke, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: Luther's Lehre von der Schöpfung aus dem Nichts in der Grossen Genesisvorlesung (1535–1545)* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2004). Luther regards even God's continuing creation as a *creatio ex nihilo*. *LW* 7:210; *WA* 44:455.

- 25 Jon Mackenzie, "Luther's Topology: *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and the Cultivation of the Concept of Place in Martin Luther's Theology," *Modern Theology* 29, no. 2 (April 2013): 83–103.
- 26 Robert Kolb, "God and His Human Creatures in Luther's Sermons on Genesis: The Reformer's Early Use of His Distinction of Two Kinds of Righteousness," *Concordia Journal* 33, no. 2 (April 2007): 169–70.
- 27 Luther "was a decided advocate for the thesis of a creatio continua." Michael Beintker, "Das Schöpfercredo in Luthers Kleinem Katechismus," *Neue Zeitschrift für Religionsphilosophie* 31 (January 1989): 5. WA 1:563, 6ff.
- 28 Schwanke, "Luther on Creation," 3.
- 29 See Oswald Bayer, Christine Helmer, and Richard H. Bliese, "I Believe That God Has Created Me with All That Exists: An Example of Catechetical-Systematics," *Lutheran Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (June 1994): 129–161.
- 30 Schwanke, "Luther on Creation," 16, points out that the Vulgate translates, "In the beginning" (Gn 1:1) with *in principio*, not with *in initio*. While *initium* means a beginning that, once started, stays in the past and has no further influence, *principium* is a beginning that stays relevant for what it initiated." See *LW* 1:10; WA 42:8, 34–9, 13.
- 31 Achtemeier, 75.
- 32 Richard Strier, "Martin Luther and the Real Presence in Nature," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 273.
- 33 Strier, 273.
- 34 Strier 289.
- 35 "If God were to withdraw his hand, this building (the creation) would collapse. . . . The sun would no longer return to its position and shine in the heavens, no child would be born; no kernel, no blade of grass, nothing at all would grow on earth or reproduce itself if God did not work forever and ever." *LW* 22:26.
- 36 Steven L. Churchill, "'This Lovely Music of Nature': Grounding an Ecological Ethic in Martin Luther's Creation Mysticism," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 26, no. 3 (June 1999): 188. This is why some scholars contend that Luther grounded his theology of Christ's presence in the Supper in part on the basis of his view of ubiquity, which the later theologians did not.
- 37 Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958, reprinted 1983), 191.
- 38 Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 105. *LW* 33:178; 33:233.
- 39 Schwanke, "Luther on Creation," 3.
- 40 Strier, 273.
- 41 Martin Luther, *Luther's Meditations on the Gospels*, trans. and arr. Roland H. Bainton (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962): 64–65.
- 42 St. Augustine, "Tractate on John's Gospel," 24:1, from Internet Christian Classics Ethereal Library: [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org).
- 43 Achtemeier, 84.
- 44 Berry, 45.
- 45 Kolb-Wengert, 389.
- 46 Schwanke, "Luther on Creation," 90; see *LW* 1:39; 6:24–25.
- 47 Martin Luther, *Luther's Meditations on the Gospels*, 64–65; WA 30/2:87, 6–9; 88, 5–6, 10–11. See also, WA 46:494, 15ff. "Be joyful in God, eat, drink, use me and serve your neighbor," Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 109.
- 48 Gregersen, 25.
- 49 See Bayer, "Catechetical-Systematics," 129–161.
- 50 Gregersen, 22.
- 51 I am indebted to Dr. David Schmitt for this fortuitous expression.
- 52 See Martin E. Marty, "Simul: A Lutheran Reclamation Project in the Humanities," *The Cresset* 45 (December 1981): 7–14.
- 53 Strier, 278.

- 54 Charles P. Arand and Erik H. Herrmann, "Living in the Promises and Places of God: A Theology of the World," *Concordia Journal* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 104. See Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," theses 22–24: "That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened. The 'law brings the wrath' of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ. Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner." *LW* 31:53–55. See also the explanation to thesis 24: "Indeed 'the law is holy,' 'every gift of God good,' and 'everything that is created exceedingly good,' as in Genesis 1. But, as stated above, he who has not been brought low, reduced to nothing through the cross and suffering, takes credit for works and wisdom and does not give credit to God. He thus misuses and defiles the gifts of God." *LW* 31:55.
- 55 Bornkamm, 191.
- 56 Reimann, 32.
- 57 Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 110
- 58 Bornkamm, 192–93.
- 59 James Arne Nestingen, "Preaching the Catechism," *Word & World* 10, no. 1 (December 1990): 39.
- 60 Nestingen (personal conversation). Gustaf Wingren points out that for "Irenaeus, salvation is the same as the realization of God's original purpose with creation as stated in Genesis 1:26–31." Gustaf Wingren, "The Doctrine of Creation: Not an Appendix But the First Article," *Word & World* 4, no. 4 (September 1984): 361.
- 61 Nestingen, "Preaching the Catechism," 39.
- 62 H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 131.
- 63 Quoted in Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 108.
- 64 Bayer speaks of a "conversion to the world, a turning toward the creature." *Martin Luther's Theology*, 107.
- 65 Bornkamm, 182.
- 66 Luther, "The Summaries of the Psalms, 1531," in Bruce A. Cameron, ed., *Reading the Psalms with Luther* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 245.
- 67 Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, reprint, 2011), notes that it was characteristic of the Reformation to focus on the small and delicate prior to the eighteenth century.
- 68 Bornkamm, 182; WA TR 5, No. 5539.
- 69 C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, Part I, chapter 9.
- 70 A fortuitous expression of Holmes Rolston III, "Perpetual Perishing, Perpetual Renewal," *The Northern Review* 28 (Winter 2006): 111.



# C. S. Lewis's Depiction of Death in *The Last Battle*

Francis C. Rossow



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**T**he *Last Battle*, the last novel in C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, deals with the end of his imagined world of Narnia and, symbolically, also with the end of our own world of Earth. The title of the novel refers to the last battle prior to the end of Narnia between the followers of the lion Aslan (the Christ symbol in all seven of the books comprising the *Chronicles*) and those who reject Aslan,

a battle that the followers of Aslan lose at the cost of their own lives. The depiction of their deaths does much to suggest, illustrate, dramatize, or reinforce what the Scriptures say about physical death and its sequels (eternal life or eternal death).

In doing so, *The Last Battle*, we must remember, is a children's story designed for the reader's pleasure, not a theological treatise or a Sunday school lesson. Its content is imaginary, not reality. Although the book obviously has Christian overtones, it is not primarily intended to be serious speculation about the nature of death and its outcomes. What Lewis said in his preface to *The Great Divorce*, a novel dealing with heaven and hell, applies equally to *The Last Battle*: "It has, of course—or I intended it to have—a moral. But the transmortal conditions are solely an imaginative supposal: they are not even a guess or a speculation at what actually awaits us. The last thing I wish is to arouse factual curiosity about the details of the afterworld."<sup>1</sup> Lewis's works, like all merely human writings, lack the advantages of inspiration (in the biblical sense) and inerrancy characteristic of the Scriptures. Yet it is surprising how frequently, accurately, and skillfully Lewis's depiction of death and the afterworld

*If, however, you have not read The Last Battle, I suggest that you do so—even now.*

suggests what the Scriptures say about the same issues. It's, frankly, not only edifying but even enjoyable to confront these echoes of biblical truth in the writings of C. S. Lewis, and it is in that spirit that we proceed.

Before proceeding, permit a parenthetical insert. I assume that if you are reading this article you have read *The Last Battle* or are at least interested in C. S. Lewis. If, however, you have not read *The Last Battle*, I suggest that you do so—even now. It won't take more than three or four hours, and it will be a lot more fun than reading this article. Besides, doing so will spare both you and me from a complex and lengthy plot summary that will delay the stated focus of this article, Lewis's insights on the phenomenon of physical death and what follows.

The climactic battle between the followers of Aslan and his enemies occurs near the middle of the book. It takes place in the vicinity of a small, rude stable designed to house a naive donkey named Puzzle, who has been persuaded by Shift, an ape, to play the role of Aslan by wearing a lion skin found floating in the water. Prior to the battle Puzzle had been rescued from his blasphemous task, and the stable is now claimed to house Tashlan (a shallow, unionistic blend of the names of Tash, a pagan god, and of Aslan, the true God of Narnia). Shift and the Rishda Tarkaan, the leader of the pagan Calormenes, announce that Tashlan is very angry and ready to dole out dire punishments to the perplexed Narnian talking animals and humans assembled outside and waiting to see their Deity and hear words of hope and comfort.

To prove that Aslan (or now Tashlan) is in an ugly mood toward those Narnians who wish to see him, a talking cat named Ginger, a traitor to Aslan, has been planted among the Narnians to volunteer to enter the stable and then pretend to be horrified by what he sees. Cool as a cucumber he primly enters the stable—and emerges like a projectile, caterwauling with terror, and losing the gift of speech and reason with which Aslan had endowed him. The proof he provides is better than he intended; his pretense becomes reality. Moments later, at the inception of the battle, Shift is thrown into the stable, there is a flash of blue-green light, thunder and earth-shaking, and he is no more. Evidently, some horrible Thing is inside at that.

The goal of Aslan's enemies during the battle that has now begun is to force those Aslan supporters who survive the battle through the door to the stable to suffer the mysterious fate that awaits them. Eventually, Tirian, king of Narnia, Eustace Scrubb, Jill Pole, and other loyal believers in Aslan are forced into the stable, King Tirian managing to take with him his principal enemy, Rishda Tarkaan.

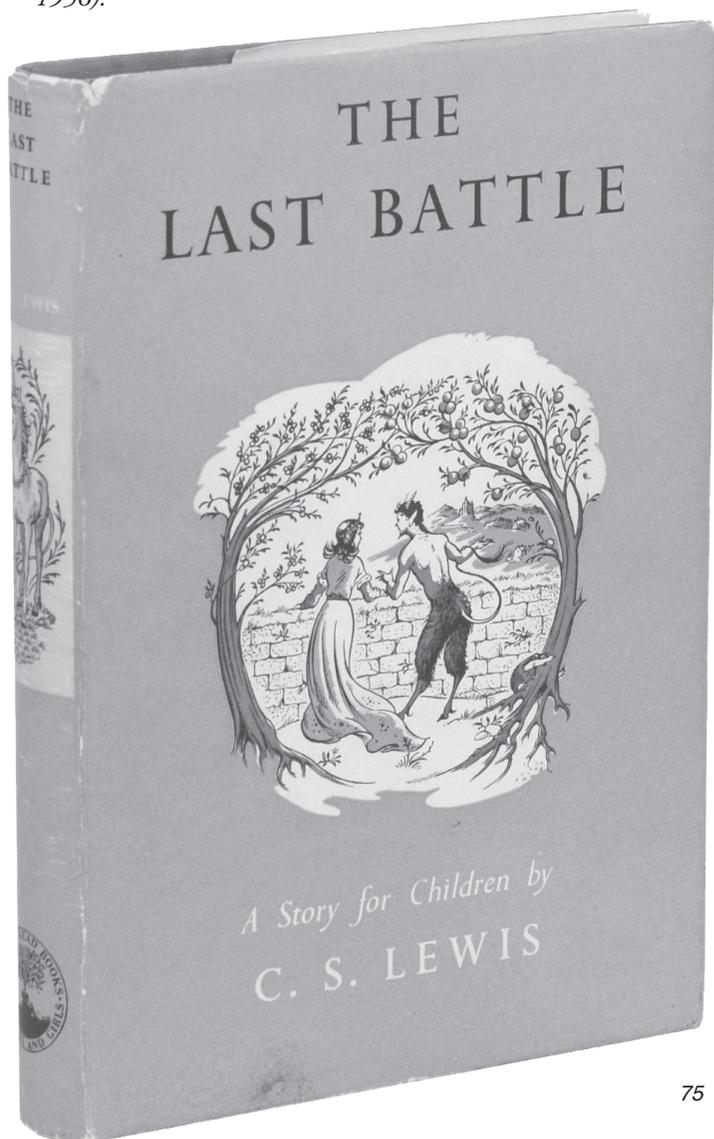
What is inside turns out to be a surprise for both the Narnians and for Rishda Tarkaan. The latter discovers that the false god Tash, which even he didn't really

believe in, does exist. Tash is a frightening satanic monster, “a Miserific Vision,”<sup>2</sup> human in shape but having the head and beak of a vulture, a creature equipped with four arms ending in sharp, cruel talons. This monster seizes Rishda and carries him off as his prey. For King Tirian it is a pleasant surprise. He is surrounded by peace and beauty and greeted by many followers of Aslan, both ancient and contemporary, and all alive and well and youthful in appearance. Among them are Eustace and Jill, his fellow warriors, as well as the Pevensie children (Peter, Edmund, and Lucy), and other Aslan

supporters from previous stories in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Best of all, Tirian is welcomed by Aslan himself.

Jill and Eustace, of course, had preceded Tirian into the stable. But why were the Pevensies there? They had been killed in a train wreck back on Earth, but mysteriously they had not been aware of the accident. As Edmund describes it, “There was a frightful roar and something hit me with a bang, but it didn’t hurt. And I felt not

*The first edition of C. S. Lewis’s The Last Battle, the final book in the Chronicles of Narnia series (London: The Bodley Head, 1956).*



so much scared—as, well, excited. . . . I'd had a rather sore knee. . . . I noticed it had suddenly gone. . . . And then—here we were.”<sup>3</sup> Lord Digory in the same accident, confirms Edmund's experience, saying, “You and I, Polly, chiefly felt that *we had been unstiffened. . . . we stopped feeling old*” (158, italics mine).

The biblical truth reinforced by Lewis's description of these deaths is that death for believers in the triune God is a more pleasant experience than it appears to be. It is no accident that the Bible often likens physical death to a sleep. “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints” (Ps 116:15). Some kind of soul-life or consciousness continues immediately after death and before the resurrection of the body, and that resurrected body is free of sickness and aging. The experience of Rishda, on the other hand, demonstrates the “hell” that in some manner exists for those who worship false gods or no gods at all.

Jill and Eustace, too, had been involved in the same accident that killed the Pevensie family. Only in their case it was a variation of the customary “magic” that whisked people from England into Narnia, this time to rescue King Tirian and assist him in his battle against his Calormene enemies. There is no biblical counterpart to this experience, but Jill and Eustace's speculation about their “survival” is fascinating. Eustace wonders whether they were “smashed up by the British Railways” and were “dead over there in England” (108), for “when that awful jerk came—the one that seemed to throw us into Narnia—I thought it was . . . a railway accident. So I was jolly glad to find ourselves here [in Narnia] instead” (108–109). This speculation seems to support the contention that death, for a Christian, is not the horror it may appear to be.

For this death, uncertain whether it will be like its dreadful appearance or like its pleasant reality, the followers of Aslan have, before the battle, an appropriate attitude. Though sharing the natural fear of death, they are also confident that everything will turn out all right. In the words of King Tirian: “Courage . . . we are all between the *paws* of the true Aslan” (121, italics mine), a brilliant assurance because it reminds us of the scriptural observation that we are “in God's hands,” and yet the imagery is consistent with Lewis's metaphor of a lion as the Christ-figure.

Equally remarkable is Lewis's image for physical death as a door (in this case the door to the stable), a familiar both biblical and secular metaphor for the phenomenon. And since the Bible also speaks of Christ as a door, it provides a more positive view of death than the door metaphor ordinarily connotes.

At one point in the novel the door metaphor is replaced by “the jaws of death,” a familiar metaphor for death in especially metaphysical poetry. When Poggin, a dwarf, speaks of death as a “dark door,” Tirian agrees: “It is indeed a grim door. . . . It is more like a *mouth*,” but then suggests an alternative to being “devoured” (as the mouth metaphor implies) by adding, “It may be for us the door to Aslan's country and we shall *sup* at his table tonight” (146, italics mine). The metaphor for heaven as a “feast”

is also a well-known biblical image for heaven. (See Isaiah 25:6.)

An especially insightful contribution by Lewis is the connection he draws between the stable of the novel and the birth of Christ. When her companions notice that the inside of the stable is miraculously bigger than its outside, Lucy comments, “In our world too [Earth], a stable had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world”—a reference to the infant Jesus (161). Lewis is using the word “stable” in two senses, stable as a dwelling for animals and stable as a manger. But, even more profoundly, he is using the word “bigger” in two different senses. As applied to the child Jesus, “bigger” signifies, importance, power, value, but as applied to an animal shelter it has a spatial sense. Viewed from the outside the stable in the novel is just a small, narrow shack. But viewed from the inside, it is a beautiful landscape of trees and mountains and rivers with no limits or boundaries in sight or in reach.

The association of the Christmas event with the subject of death is biblical. Without minimizing the importance of Jesus’s thirty-three years of life on our earth, the Bible points out that Christ was born at Bethlehem, among other reasons, to *die*. “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, [Christ] also himself likewise took part of the same; that *through death* he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Heb 2:14–15, italics mine). Lewis is right to associate Christ’s birth with death.

Lewis’s other insight, the stable being bigger on the inside than on the outside, suggests a brilliant second level of meaning to the frequent refrain at the end of many of our liturgical prayers, “world without end.” Usually, we understand (correctly) that refrain in a chronological sense: that God’s heaven exists forever and ever. But Lewis suggests an additional meaning: a spatial or geographical sense. God’s heaven is spread out forever; it has no boundaries, no limits. “Further up and further in!” the new arrivals from Narnia shout to one another over and over as they run effortlessly and endlessly, swim up waterfalls, and explore mountains without fatigue. “World without end”—both time and space march on forever in God’s world, suggesting that heavenly pleasures are inexhaustible. “At thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore” (Ps 16:11).

As the Narnians travel through the endless area inside the stable, they are pleasantly surprised to discover that Narnia and Earth, though they have just witnessed their destruction and end, still exist, restored, indeed re-created, newer and better than ever (192–197). During their celebration of this discovery, Lord Digory explains: “That [the former Narnia] had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia which . . . always will be here: just as our own world, England and all, is just a shadow or copy of something in Aslan’s real world” (195). In part this overlaps with the biblical truth that God will create a new earth and heaven after their destruction at the time of the Last Judgment. “For, behold, I create new heavens and

a new earth,” says God in Isaiah 65:17. St. John thrills us with the words of his vision in Revelation 21:1–3: “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away. . . . And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven. . . . And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.”

A blessing in heaven most Christians look forward to is a reunion with fellow Christians, especially those who are relatives and friends. Such reunion is prominent in *The Last Battle*. Most of the followers of Aslan in this and in the previous volumes in *The Chronicles of Narnia* are present when Tirian, Jill, and Eustace find themselves in Aslan’s country contained in the stable. “And there was greeting and kissing and hand-shaking and old jokes revived, (you’ve no idea how good an old joke sounds when you take it out again after a rest of five or six hundred years)” (205–206). The saved marvel that they no longer experience fear (199), Aslan’s love for them and their love for Aslan driving out fear. (See 1 John 4:18.) Peter Pevensie, one-time High King of Narnia, tells the others, “I’ve a feeling we’ve got to the country where everything is allowed” (157). King Caspian in *The Silver Chair*, after his resurrection from death and his arrival in Aslan’s country, learns from Aslan a similar truth: “You cannot want wrong things any more”<sup>4</sup> What superbly simple ways Lewis has of expressing Christian doctrine, in this instance the doctrine of our perfection in sanctification once we’re with God in heaven.

A note of harsh reality in this pleasant picture is the absence of Susan Pevensie. Eustace quotes her as once saying on Earth, “What wonderful memories you have! Fancy your still thinking about all those funny games we used to play when we were children” (154). To which Jill replies, “She always was a sight too keen on being grown up” (154). (Remember Jesus’s warning: “Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein”? [Mk 10:15].) Also absent from Aslan’s country are most of those dwarfs who claimed their neutrality in the war between good and evil. “The dwarfs are for the dwarfs” was their repeated cry. Now that they’re in the stable, they seem to be more self-deprived than other-deprived. To them it remains a smelly stable. Where there is actually light, there is—for them—only darkness. When Lucy offers them violets, they regard these flowers as stable litter. Provided a feast by Aslan, they reject the food, calling it mere hay and old turnips and cabbage, and the drink as water from a trough that a donkey’s been at. Aslan describes their mind-set as having “chosen cunning instead of belief” and of being “so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out” (169). In scriptural language, “seeing they cannot see and hearing they cannot hear.”

Surprisingly present in Aslan’s country, however, is a Calormene named Emeth (his name is the Hebrew word for truth), a noble person to be sure, but a believer in Tash rather than Aslan. His acceptance by Aslan is *the* theological crux in *The*

*Chronicles of Narnia*. Even recalling the warning that this is just a story, not to be pressed at every point for some theological significance, while it may help, does not satisfactorily solve the crux. In the very presence of Aslan, Emeth *admits*, “I am no son of thine but the servant of Tash” (188). To which Aslan incredibly replies, “All the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me” (188).

Although Aslan growls at the suggestion that he and Tash are one (as suggested by the portmanteau coinage Tashlan) and insists that they are complete opposites, Aslan continues, “I take to me the service which thou hast done to him. For I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him” (189). All of which seems to introduce the heresies of salvation by works and the rejection of Christ as the only way to salvation.

Employing the hermeneutical principle of interpreting Scripture with Scripture (or *in* this instance Lewis with *Lewis*), we can cite numerous passages from Lewis’s writings that accent salvation by God’s grace through Christ alone. The clearest of these is in *The Silver Chair*. Suffering from excruciating thirst, Jill Pole approaches a stream for a drink of water, but hesitates when lying beside the stream is a lion (Aslan). She decides to search elsewhere for water, but the lion replies, “There is no other stream,”<sup>5</sup> This calls to mind the words of Jesus in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh to the Father, but by me.” A passage from *Mere Christianity* may also shed light on this difficulty: “Here is another thing that used to puzzle me. Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in Him? But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.”<sup>6</sup> Maybe you’ve heard the observation that as far as the means to salvation are concerned we are bound to those that God has appointed. But God himself may not necessarily be bound to those means. As Lewis reminds us again and again, “Aslan is not a tame lion.” With the Emeth incident Lewis, I believe, meant to accent God’s grace. But good as his intention may have been, his performance left much to be desired.

But let us not accentuate the negative. At the end of *The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader”* Lewis almost betrays the Christian overtones of *The Chronicles of Narnia* that he so often seems to wish to hide. It happens when Lucy Pevensie expresses her disappointment at not being allowed any return visits to Narnia. She fears that back

*Lewis’s portrait of physical death ... is intended to encourage and enlighten Christian readers as they approach their residence with the triune God in eternity.*

in England she will never see Aslan again. But Aslan assures her she *will* see him again even in England. “But there,” he says, I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there.”<sup>7</sup> Given that clarification, it seems to follow that Lewis’s portrait of physical death and its sequels in *The Last Battle* is intended to—and does in fact (despite the possibility of human error)—encourage and enlighten Christian readers as they approach their residence with the triune God in eternity. With what stirring words Lewis describes that outcome at the very end of *The Last Battle*: “But for them [the Narnian believers] it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story . . . which goes on forever: in which *every* chapter is better than the one before” (211).

## Endnotes

- 1 C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1973), x.
- 2 An antonym to “Beatific Vision” coined by Lewis in *Perelandra*.
- 3 C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1984), 158. All future page locations for citations from this book will be in parentheses in the text of the article.
- 4 C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1981), 240.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 6 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, Macmillan, 1952), 50.
- 7 C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader”* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1980), 247.

*Homiletical  
Helps*



# Anatomy of a Sermon

## “Grace, Mercy, Peace . . . Lives of Significance”

### By Dale A. Meyer

Peter Nafzger

*Author’s note: Dale Meyer preached this sermon at the opening of Concordia Seminary’s 181st academic year, August 23, 2019. The text was John 9:1–5. A video of the original sermon can be viewed at <https://scholar.csl.edu/cs1920/1/>. The sermon is represented in italic type below which can be read all at once by following the gray bars.*

In an article in *Time* magazine from May 31, 1963, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth recalled advising young theologians to keep a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. “Read them both,” he told them. But read them in order. “Interpret newspapers from your Bible,” he said. As Dale Meyer preached this sermon during the opening service of his final year as president of Concordia Seminary, he put this advice into practice. With several newspapers literally in hand, and with the Scriptures open before him, he read from both. And he read them in order.

*It is my honor and truly my pleasure to welcome new students to Concordia Seminary. I’m also pleased to welcome your families, your mentors, returning students, and everyone in the chapel this morning. Just as heartily, I welcome you who are joining us by livestream. Welcome to all to Concordia Seminary!*

Many sermons begin with formulaic greetings that contribute little to what follows. Not so in this case. With these words, Meyer signals that he will not be preaching to the culture, or to a denomination, or to an abstract Christian experience. He will be preaching to *these* specific people as they engage in *their* unique vocations at *this* particular time and place.

At the same time, he knows there will be eavesdroppers. Some would join via livestream, and he names them. While he did not know at the time that this sermon would be published, sermons for such occasions often find

their way into print. I imagine that crossed his mind, too. Which points to an emerging reality about preaching in our contemporary situation. Anything uttered in public today can be (and often is) recorded. There's wisdom in recognizing that your sermon may be heard by people who are not presently in the room.

*For quite a few years I've had the habit of taking newspaper front pages that caught my fancy and having them framed. My collection of framed front pages is eclectic. I do have the 2005 Chicago Tribune celebrating the World Series victory of the Chicago White Sox. I did not frame the Cubs! And I have Mark McGwire's record homerun page framed as well. But of all the framed front pages I have, most of them are serious and remind me why we have congregations, why we have church ministries, why we have this Seminary.*

Homiletics professor Thomas Long (whom Meyer references at the end of the sermon) says that, in the introduction to a sermon, the preacher makes a promise to his hearers. He gives them a glimpse of what he is going to say, and, implicitly, he asks them to stay with him. The goal, of course, is that it's a promise they want him to keep! Sometimes the preacher states this promise explicitly. Other times, like in this sermon, the promise is more subtle. Without saying it directly, Meyer promises that his newspaper collection is going to justify the existence of the seminary he has been leading for the last fifteen years.

*I brought this one with me. It's from the New York Times of August 19, 2016. On the front page is a photograph of a five-year-old Syrian boy being taken to the hospital in an ambulance. The caption says, "Five-year-old Omran Daqneesh was rescued Wednesday after an airstrike in Aleppo, Syria." Five years old. It should be the time of innocence and play but Omran's face is filled with dust, dirt, with blood and bewilderment. Here's another front page. This also is from the New York Times, June 26 of this year. You may remember the photo. This is the caption: "Horror and Heartbreak. The deaths of two migrants who are trying to cross the Rio Grande led to widespread anguish on Tuesday. The bodies of Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez and his 23-month-old daughter, Valeria, were found near Brownsville, Texas." A father and his daughter dead at the edge of the river. Pass this around, pass it through the pews, okay? And don't pass it fast. Take your time and let the picture burn itself into your memory. One more, although I don't have a newspaper for this. This is local, only a few miles away. Today, this Friday morning, Xavier Usanga was supposed to be in second grade at Clay Elementary School. He's not because a*

*couple weeks ago he was killed by a gun. He is the eleventh child killed in St. Louis this year.*

*Answer me this: With all the suffering and the sin in our cities, in our nation and in our world, why are you holing up in a secluded gothic seminary to study theology? I mean, really? The world wonders, "What's that about?"*

Here Meyer raises the stakes with his opening promise. There are legitimate questions about the usefulness of a seminary education in today's context, and he takes those questions seriously. If a seminary education is worthwhile, it is only because it helps us make sense of and respond to situations such as these. That the sermon will deal with these questions is a promise his hearers—especially those who are committing the next four years of their lives to studying theology—are interested in hearing him keep. In a sense, this sermon will be an apology (as in, defense) for doing theology.

Notice also what he's doing with these newspapers. It is not enough for a preacher simply to mention what's going on in the culture. Mentions are all we usually take time to consider. A shooting here. A scandal there. Breaking news interrupted by more breaking news. We scroll through a constant stream of reports, swiping away headlines like flies at a picnic. Rarely do we stop and ponder the significance of an individual story for what it says about God, human nature, and the mission of the church.

Meyer combats this by forcing his hearers to slow down. Pass the paper around. "And don't pass it fast." He's modeling observation. Theological contemplation. Pastoral reflection. He's helping his hearers—many of whom will soon be preachers—learn to *listen*. This is no small thing. In his little book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out that preachers have a particularly difficult time listening. "Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking."<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer is concerned that those who fail to listen to others also have a hard time listening to God. "He who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God, too."<sup>2</sup> The faithful preacher is therefore, first and foremost, a listener. He listens to God through careful study of the Scriptures and the church's confession, and he listens to his hearers through careful study of their context and culture. Indeed, pastoral listening is a prerequisite for faithful proclamation of God's word. Once more Bonhoeffer: "Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by Him who is Himself the great listener and

whose work they should share. We should listen with the ears of God so that we may speak the Word of God.”<sup>3</sup>

*The disciples want to talk theology. As Jesus passes by, he sees a man blind from birth and his disciples ask him, “Professor, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” These students saw that human being as an object lesson for talk about sin. They wanted to use him to theologize. Jesus resisted the trap to theologize about a human being. Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” I can’t speak for other seminaries in the United States but at Concordia Seminary doing theology is not an end in itself. We get into the word of God, into our confessions, into books of theology only as a means to bring the works of Christ to hurting individuals. No individual is ever to be an object for our theological speculation. Instead, we go to that person who is in darkness with the light of Christ.*

At this point Meyer transitions to the text. His description of Jesus as “professor” and the disciples as “students” is superb. Not only are the translations appropriate, but they also make a penetrating connection to his hearers. The disciples, as budding theologians, wanted to talk with Jesus *about* this poor man’s plight. They approached their professor with a valid question, but with little regard for the man’s personal well-being. “They wanted to use him to theologize,” Meyer says. In response, Jesus did not merely talk *about* the man. He spoke *to* him. What’s more, Jesus physically reached out to touch him. If there were no time constraints on this sermon, I might have lingered a little longer in the narrative and reflected on Jesus’s intimate interaction with the man. Verses 6 and 7 describe the actions of a God who isn’t afraid to get his hands dirty in his work of restoration.

Two things came to mind as I listened to this part of the sermon. First, I thought about the ways in which I have brought real life examples as object lessons into my teaching. I’m not sorry for sharing stories about ministry and helping students learn from my experience. But there’s a fine line between discussing individuals in a way that honors their humanity and unique circumstances, and discussing them in a way that unintentionally objectifies them. As I sat with my colleagues on the faculty in the north transept of the chapel, wearing my velvet academic robe and gold-tasseled cap, I was convicted of the ways in which I have been guilty of the latter. The law was functioning to accuse.

But that wasn't all. "We get into the word of God, into our confessions, into books of theology only as a means to bring the works of Christ to hurting individuals." In other words, theology is for proclamation.<sup>4</sup> Parsing Greek verbs, attending to Hebrew vowel points, examining ancient church councils, analyzing confessional articles, unpacking Lutheran distinctions, reading theories of counseling and education and rhetoric—we devote ourselves to such things *so that* we might proclaim the gospel faithfully. Theologians who lose sight of the fundamental mission of the church not only unwittingly objectify individuals like the blind man in the text. They may also end up objectifying God.

To this real possibility, Meyer is unambiguous: Not on my watch! Concordia Seminary will not exist as an ivory tower! We study theology—and we study it *carefully*—but never as “an end in itself.” For a congregation of students and professors who love studying (and debating) fine points of theology, this was an important message. The law was also functioning to guide.

On the topic of preaching the law, we should remember that the preacher does not have control over the law he preaches. He may think he is accusing, or he may suppose he is guiding. But the effect of his proclamation is above his pay grade. God is the one who works through his word, and he works where and when (and how) he pleases.<sup>5</sup> When speaking about the “uses” of the law, we must always remember God is the one using it. He uses the law we preach to keep order in the world, to accuse sinners, and to guide Christian living. Sometimes he does more than one at the same time.

*The theme for this academic year, as you know, is “Grace, Mercy, Peace . . . Lives of Significance.” The grace of God is his totally undeserved favor because of Jesus Christ. The blind man certainly didn't merit the grace of God, but neither do we by our presence and our studies and our work here. God's grace is totally unmerited. As the hymn says, “Nothing in my hands I bring. Simply to Thy cross I cling.” The grace of God comes to us in mercy. Better to say it “mercies,” the plural, all those acts of loving kindness with which he surrounds us day in and day out, more than we know. “Every morning mercies new fall as fresh as morning dew. Every evening, let me pay tribute with the closing day, for Thy mercies, Lord, are sure; Thy compassion doth endure.” In receiving the grace and mercy of God in our past, present, and future, you and I have peace. Diane and I were watching the news the other morning. The news and a cup of caffeinated coffee really get my engine going. Diane said in the midst of the news, “The whole country has gone berserk.” That is true. More than ever before in my*

*lifetime the whole country, the world has gone berserk. In this world gone mad, you can apply this to yourself in the singular: each and every one of you who has been graced and receive the mercies of God are a presence of calm. Jesus says, "My peace I give unto you; not as the world gives do I give unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled" (Jn 14:27). The prophet Isaiah says, "You will keep them in perfect peace whose hearts are stayed on you because they trust in you" (Is 26:3). It is well with your soul because you have and will continue to receive the total gift, the grace of God in his manifold mercies that come in Jesus Christ.*

"Grace, Mercy, Peace . . . Lives of Significance." That's the theme for this academic year. Preaching in light of an academic theme, or a congregational mission statement, or a specific ministry campaign, can be a challenge. There's always the risk that the theme will overpower the text, or that it will distort the biblical teaching. Meyer avoids these pitfalls by helping his hearers envision God's grace, mercy, and peace in relation to the blind man. Grace, he says, is God's favorable disposition because of Jesus. His grace leads him to deal mercifully with people who neither earn nor merit his favor. That is the blind man. He merited nothing from Jesus in the text. Neither do we. This the gospel promise that forms the heart of this sermon. Meyer announces God's grace and mercy, not only for the man born blind, but also *for us*. The result of his grace and mercy—namely, peace—is also a gift. Jesus has come to bring peace to a violent world. To a world "gone berserk." This peace comes *to us*. Then, it also comes *through us*.

This paragraph includes a signature of Meyer's preaching and teaching (and everyday conversation) that I have long appreciated and admired. I'm thinking of his graceful inclusion of time-honored hymnody. In this paragraph, he draws on the rich tradition of a singing church by quoting three different hymns: "Rock of Ages," "Every Morning Mercies New," and "It Is Well with My Soul." Not every hearer will catch every reference. But for those who have ears to hear, this language calls to mind the faithfulness of God across the generations. It reminds the hearers that God's grace, mercy, and peace has been sustaining his people from the very beginning. And it inspires his hearers to make the words we sing our own.

*This has come to you as a mission. The mission of God had you in its sights. In eternity, the Lord Jesus Christ was ordained to come into your life with the works of God and his light. Now we are not cocooned in the seminary and we dare not be cocooned in country club congregations. Now we take the mission of God and the goodness of this light of Christ into the world. Martin Luther said this, "A Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor.*

*Otherwise he is not a Christian.” There are, you know, two tables to the Ten Commandments, not just the first table. Luther goes on, “He lives in Christ through faith and in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself and to God and by love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor.”*

Now he comes to the mission. Here Meyer shines. As the president and “first preacher” of Concordia Seminary, Meyer is relentless in his insistence that this seminary focus singularly on the mission of our Lord Jesus Christ. He repeatedly reminds all who serve at this seminary that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves. “The mission of God had you in its sights.” We have been called, gathered, and enlightened by God’s Spirit through his word. We have also been sent by the same Spirit and word to further the proclamation of Jesus to a world gone mad. This is not simply an institution of higher learning. It is part of a mission. It is not *our* mission. And it is not *only* a mission to the people already in our congregations. The mission is God’s, and it must extend to all people.

*When Jesus came upon the blind man, when he was approached by a leper, when he saw the sick, the demon-possessed, and not even just the dying, the dead, he brought to them in a personal way the works of God. When you see an addict, a person who is incarcerated, a marriage that is struggling maybe beyond repair, when you see someone who is homeless, when you come upon someone who is hospitalized, homebound, hopeless, when you meet with a struggling single parent, when you come to any struggling soul just trying to make it in this life, bring the works of God and the light of Jesus.*

*There was a TV commentator on a couple of weeks ago who was talking about the mass shootings, and what he said applies to so much that’s going on in our country and in our world. The commentator said that the shooter can take his own life because he sees no value in his life. And the shooter can take the lives of others because he sees no value in their lives. When you come across the myriad people in your life who do not know the grace and mercy of God and therefore do not understand that their lives are significant, personally with his grace, mercy, and his peace, then you go to them not as an object to theologize but as an extension of the love of Jesus for the people for whom he died. Never meet a stranger because everyone that you meet is someone for whom Jesus died.*

Contemporary homileticians encourage preachers to avoid theological abstractions and generalities.<sup>6</sup> While concepts have their place, they do not communicate effectively in a culture that learns primarily through story and image. Preachers should rather employ concrete examples to teach the faith.

The danger of a theme like “Grace, Mercy, and Peace . . .” is that all three of these terms are abstractions. They sound nice, and rightly understood, they carry a lot of theological weight. But in the abstract, they too easily ring hollow. Notice how Meyer takes these abstract concepts and helps his hearers imagine them in concrete situations. He begins by recalling Jesus’s interaction with specific people who had specific problems. In addition to the blind man in our text, there was the leper, the sick, the demon-possessed, the dying, and even the dead. Likewise, Meyer describes some of the concrete troubles people face today. The addict, the struggling marriage, the single parent, the homeless and hospitalized and homebound—such people need specific and personal application of God’s grace, mercy, and peace.

By naming these concrete situations, Meyer prepares his hearers to reflect on the second half of the academic theme. Christians (especially those preparing for professional church work) see every life as a life of significance. Every life they encounter is a life for whom Jesus suffered, died, rose, and promised to return. This is particularly important in a culture that demonizes opponents and dismisses those on the margins. Your life is significant, says Meyer. So are theirs!

*So we will begin the 181st academic year. Yes, we do theology here. We get into the books here as a means to bring the good news of God to hurting lives. Sometime in the next year or so you will be reading a homiletics book by Dr. Thomas Long. Dr. Long is a homiletics professor at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. Early in the book Dr. Long makes a significant point which we all need to keep in mind. The pastor who is preparing a sermon for Sunday goes to the scriptures on behalf of the people. As you and I study theology, we are doing this on behalf of the people, on behalf of the children who are being victimized by a violent society, on behalf of their families who grieve and may be dysfunctional, on behalf of anybody in any kind of darkness. When you and I study theology and when we prepare Bible classes and sermons and lectures, we go to the scriptures on behalf of the people.*

*That means we now are going to hit the books with earnestness for the sake of the people for whom Jesus died and rose again, that their lives too might be significant in this life and for the life to come. Jesus says, “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work.” Amen.*

After proclaiming the grace, mercy, and peace of Jesus that makes our lives significant, and after reminding us of our place in the mission of

God to this violent and dysfunctional world, Meyer calls us as a seminary community to hit the books. His apology for doing theology is complete. It is still day, as Jesus says in the text. Which means it is time to get to work.

Dale Meyer is retiring as president of Concordia Seminary. But with sermons like this, he'll continue to teach preaching. Indeed, in this sermon he expands on Barth's advice to keep a newspaper in one hand and a Bible in the other. Meyer calls us to hold onto a third thing: the lives of our specific hearers. We hold in our hearts the hopes and fears, the joys and tears, the strife and struggles and unique circumstances of the people we are called to serve. These people will accompany us into the classroom, and into the library. They will be with us as we study and debate. We will fulfill our unique vocations as part of this seminary community with the mission of Jesus ever in view, and we will work with all our strength until our Lord returns.

After the sermon was over and the opening service had ended, I did something I don't normally do. I went back to my office, took off my robe and cap, and sat down at my desk to write a personal note to President Meyer. I needed to thank him for what he had just preached. I was a student in his fourth-year homiletics class sixteen years ago, and I was his student again during this sermon.

In the note, I told him that he could have kept on going, and that the Lord still has much to say through him. I also could have reminded him that preachers don't ever really retire. They simply continue preaching from a different pulpit. In Dale Meyer's case, that's a good thing.

## Endnotes

- 1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* (Harper Collins, 1954), 97.
- 2 Ibid., 98.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 See Gerhard Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Fortress Press, 1995).
- 5 See Augsburg Confession V.2: "Through [preaching and the sacraments], as through means, [God] gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, *where and when he wills*, in those who hear the gospel."
- 6 See, for example, Robert G. Hughes and Robert Kysar, *Preaching Doctrine for the Twenty-First Century* (Fortress Press, 2009), 12–13; Charles H. Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton, *Preaching in Transition: Incarnational Translation for Preaching* (Eerdmans, 2007), especially chapter 1.



# *Reviews*



**THE SOUL OF WINE: Savoring the Goodness of God.** By Gisela H. Kreglinger. Intervarsity Press, 2019. Hardcover. 160 pages. \$16.00.

Understanding that the readership of the *Concordia Journal* includes theologians and dedicated wine enthusiasts, *The Soul of Wine: Savoring the Goodness of God* will not disappoint. The author artfully writes so that expert and beginner alike can enjoy the wisdom found in the fruit of the vine and in the resurrected Christ.

The oenophiles that populate this readership will agree with the premise of this book that wine is unique in that it reconnects us to God through Holy Communion, brings joy into our life, and is part of God's miraculous creation.

Gisela Kreglinger, who holds a PhD in historical theology, grew up in a Lutheran household on a family winery in a small medieval village in Germany. And while her vocational goal was to become a theologian and work in God's vineyard, she sees close parallels to her two sister's chosen vocation of working in the family vineyard.

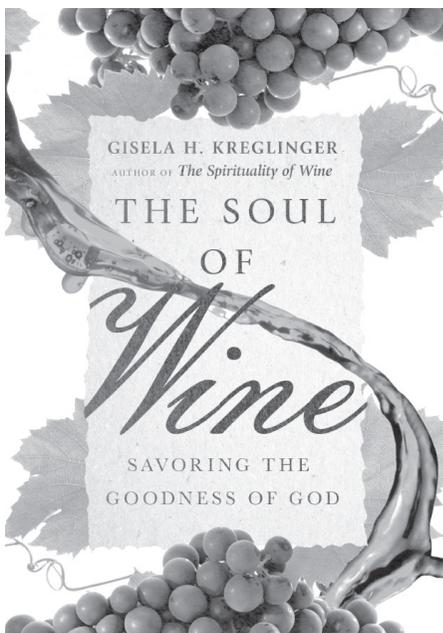
*The Soul of Wine* is a perfect countercultural anecdote for those who are exhausted from attempting to faithfully live in a broken, disconnected world. A cue that we momentarily pause and remind ourselves of what is truly important in our Christ-infused life.

Using rich biblical imagery, *The Soul of Wine* instructs that all five of our senses are a gift from God. The author urges the reader to rediscover our senses of touch, smell, and taste as one avenue

to come to know and feel God's presence within us. To reclaim wine as the gift from God that it is and allow it to help us reconnect with him, his creation, and one another.

The author weaves delightful stories of wine, feasting, and our grace-filled redemptive living. She lifts up as role models the Benedictine nuns who planted vines along the river Main in Germany, seeing wine as a gift from God to be crafted for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, for their own nourishment, and to share with neighbors.

As a student of history, Kreglinger reminds us that Martin Luther would sip Rhine wine while writing hymns to creatively capture Lutheran theology. Luther, seemingly also comprehended the medicinal value of wine, once writing to a depressed colleague about



the benefits associated with seeking the company of friends accompanied with some wine. A reminder of how a simple glass of wine shared with family and friends can bring relief from one's trials and tribulations.

Kreglinger educates us on how the inspired scribes of the Bible employ the vivid imagery of the vineyard as instruction for the entire gamut of life that shapes our own stories—birth, sickness, health, vocation, romance, hope, despair, death, and resurrection.

The prophet Isaiah envisions God as the bridegroom and his people his bride. Isaiah describes God's redemption as a feast with choice wine for all God's people. The prophet Hosea also compares God's redemption to a huge wedding banquet. And of course, Jesus's first miracle, turning water into wine, providing a glimpse of a greater feast to come where the wine of salvation will flow freely to all who believe.

Kreglinger envisions the Passover meal, the sensual smell and taste of lamb roast, bitter herbs, bread, and wine. She reminds us how Jesus built on the past traditions of feast and wine as he taught his disciples to connect their own faith to their forefathers while at the same time placing new wine into new wineskins. She urges us to utilize our sense of smell and taste while partaking of Holy Communion and experience his healing presence in our midst while we are provided with a foretaste of the heavenly feast.

God's gifts are intended to provide us enjoyment as we gratefully live out

our daily vocation. Quoting the psalmist, “[God] brings forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart” (Ps 104:14–15), the author shows that God desires us to live a joyful life as part of our spiritual journey.

By utilizing our sense of taste and smell we can connect our faith with our daily lives and experience the beauty of God's creation as we both savor and share. Taking the time to intentionally savor wine and food momentarily releases us from our anxieties and fears and to rediscover the joy of our miraculous gift of life as we sit quietly at “his pierced feet.” We “open our eyes to God's grandeur and splendor, his majesty and beauty, his life-giving presence among us.”

*Kurt Senske  
Austin, Texas*

### **THE PSALMS AS CHRISTIAN**

#### **LAMENT: A Historical**

**Commentary.** *By Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore. Eerdmans, 2014. Paper. 327 pages. \$28.00.*

### **THE PSALMS AS CHRISTIAN**

#### **PRAISE: A Historical Commentary.**

*By Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston. Eerdmans, 2019. Paper. 366 pages. \$36.00.*

*The Psalms as Christian Lament (CL) and The Psalms as Christian Praise (CP) continue the style that the authors established in their first volume, The*

*Psalms as Christian Worship* (CW), published in 2010, and reviewed in an earlier *Concordia Journal* [38 no. 2 (Spring 2012): 177–179]. All three volumes are worthy of a prominent place in the libraries of pastors and teachers.

These two latest volumes continue the collaboration of an Old Testament exegete (Waltke) and church historian (Houston). After a brief prologue, each volume has a chapter which introduces the particular genres of Lament and Praise, setting them in their historical and theological contexts. The introductions cover some interesting topics. For example, in the introduction to CP, the authors have a section on the meaning of the divine name YHWH. The authors clearly lay out the various possibilities and in so doing expose readers to the contemporary research that has been done on this topic. Their discussion includes the New Testament perspective and centers on Jesus (1–4). This kind of Christ-centered discussion is hard to find anywhere else. After reading these pages, I was eager to look more closely at some of the books and articles they had cited.

Following the introductions, as in their earlier work, these two volumes combine the history of interpretation with contemporary exegesis of particular psalms. Such collaboration enables these scholars to make a unique contribution to the interpretation of the Psalms and ultimately to the life of church.

The Laments in CL center on the traditional seven penitential psalms, minus Psalm 51, which was treated in

the earlier volume (6, 32, 38, 102, 130, and 143). To these, the authors added Psalms 5, 7, 44 and 49. The format of CL is identical to that of CW. Each chapter is divided into four parts: Part 1 discusses the use of the selected psalm in church history; Part 2 is a modern translation of each psalm; Part 3 is a modern commentary on the psalm, and Part 4 is a conclusion.

The Praise Psalms in CP focus on a subcategory of psalms that proclaim the message “I AM reigns.” These are psalms that occur mainly in Book 4 of the Psalter (Pss 93, 96, 97, 99). In addition to these psalms, other psalms with the theme of God’s reign have been included from Book 4 (Pss 90, 91, 92, 95, 98, 100, 103, and 104). CP has arranged the four parts of its commentary differently than CW and CL. Instead of beginning with the “Voice of the Church” (Part 1) and then following with a translation and modern commentary (Parts 2 and 3), this volume begins with the translation and commentary (Part 1) and then follows with the “Voice of the Church in Response” (Parts 2 and 3). This arrangement follows what the authors see as a more natural chronological sequence (CP, xii).

In neither volume do “The Voice of the Church” sections intend to present a comprehensive treatment of the history of a psalm’s interpretation. Rather, they provide selected “vignettes” from various church fathers which illustrate how a particular psalm was interpreted and used for personal or pastoral concerns. For example, in his treatment of Psalm

38, Houston summarizes Ambrose's approach, who sees satanic attacks evidenced in the psalm (123–124). He follows this with a summary of Augustine's *vox totius Christi* (voice of the whole Christ) interpretation of the speaker in this psalm. He also includes short summaries of the Antiochene fathers Theodore of Mopsuestia and Theodoret, Cassiodorus, and some Medieval Penitential Commentaries (124–131). Lutheran readers will be particularly pleased to see that insights from Martin Luther (and other Lutherans) are frequently included.

As an Old Testament exegete, I found the grammatical notes and modern exegesis to be the most helpful parts of these volumes and well worth the price of the books. For each psalm, Waltke provides his own translation along with detailed textual and grammatical notes. The notes are clear and well referenced so that interested readers can dig deeper as they wish. It is hard to find this kind of grammatical detail in most other commentaries. His commentary and exegesis on each psalm are equally detailed. Again, in this section, he brings other commentaries and scholars into conversation with a given psalm in a reader friendly way.

At times, Waltke gives us a unique interpretation of a verse or phrase. For example, his translation and interpretation of Psalm 90:12 is different than virtually any other interpreter. He is bold enough to state that no other English translation, to his knowledge, accurately represents the Hebrew text

(CP, 29). Even if I don't necessarily agree with every conclusion, I appreciate the perspective that challenges me to look at the text again and consider more carefully what it might or might not be saying.

In sum, I highly recommend all three volumes for those who would like to preach on psalms and teach them in their ministries. Given their format, these volumes contain something for everyone. Not only specialists, but laypersons can use them profitably. The authors are to be commended for giving their readers a strong Christian and Christ-centered reading of these beautiful psalms.

*Tim Saleska*

***LUTHER'S REFORM: Studies on Conversion and the Church.*** By Jared Wicks. *Wipf & Stock, 2019. Paper. 351 pages. \$40.00.*

In this 2019 reprint of *Luther's Reform: Studies on Conversion and the Church*, Jared Wicks compiles a series of essays into a thorough investigation of Luther as a Catholic theologian. Wicks seeks to accentuate Luther as an ecumenical bridge, shedding light on Luther's early development as a theologian to create common touchpoints shared by Lutherans and Catholics alike. Originally published in 1992, the essays contained in *Luther's Reform* anticipate later developments in dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics, such as the Lutheran language of justification as equivalent to the Roman Catholic

doctrine of conversion, as later found in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Given that almost thirty years have passed since the first printing of *Luther's Reform*, is Wicks's work still relevant for modern readers in a post-ecumenical age? And if he is still relevant, what does Wicks now offer to Lutheran-Catholic dialogue?

The major contribution Wicks brings in his essays pertains to grounding Luther in the Catholic tradition of the church. For instance, Luther's initial concerns regarding indulgences did not come from a fully formed Reformation theology of salvation by grace alone. Rather, Luther's concern regarding indulgences was the confusion of the indulgence's *imputed* grace, granted to the recipient for the forgiveness of sins, being *infused* grace that destroys sin and sanctifies the believer's heart. As a result of the confusion, the problem with indulgences was they destroyed the penitential life (62). In effect, Christians were no longer obligated to perform good works, as they were able to purchase indulgences to substitute for the infused grace required to get out of purgatory. Luther's attacks on indulgences were attempts to define and to defend the sacrament of penance, with the aim of nurturing and supporting Christians pastorally by encouraging good works.

Wicks's gripping prose is especially felt in his narration of events involving Luther and Cardinal Cajetan. In his chapter *Roman Reactions to Luther, 1518*, Wicks recasts the titanic encounter

between Cajetan and Luther as a tragedy of misunderstanding, rather than portraying Cajetan as the uncaring theologian seeking to destroy the heartfelt faith of Luther. As I turned the pages, I was glued to the dynamic between Cajetan and Luther, hoping for an understanding between the two giants to emerge as they clashed, but the unfortunate outcome of their meeting already had been determined as history. However, while Cajetan observed many "errors" in Luther's theology, he never branded Luther a heretic (175). Cajetan notes that with some conceptual refinement Luther's ideas could be orthodox. In another chapter, *Luther and Lived Religiosity*, Wicks emphasizes Luther's practical concerns of reform in teaching people the faith. In his pastoral works, Luther taught everything from how to pray to how to die, applying the Christian faith to every facet of life. The pastoral and practical emphasis of Luther's theology endures even today in the Lutheran Church.

The only criticism I have is recognizing a good portion of the footnotes remain untranslated. To get the full use of Wicks's book, one must know their Latin and German. Given the need to know Latin and German along with the specialized topic the book addresses, I mostly recommend this book to scholars interested in Reformation history. While this book does not have much practical use in the parish, pastors also might benefit from Wicks's insights, as pastors participate in ecumenical dialogue. Nearly thirty years since initial

publication, this book remains relevant, highlighting Luther as a Catholic theologian who wrestled with the exigencies of his day, eventually defining common ground between Lutherans and Catholics. By continuing to engage in dialogue, as Wicks exemplifies, a more complete Luther is revealed—a Luther whose theology benefits all of Christendom.

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*Christ the Vine Lutheran Mission*  
*Aviston, Illinois*

**GALATIANS: A Commentary.** By Craig S. Keener. Baker Academic, 2019. Hardcover. 848 pages. \$59.99.

This new, careful Galatians commentary deserves to be read. It raises important questions through up-to-date scholarly discussions on Galatians. It is the longer and more in depth of two Galatians commentaries written by Keener in the past two years. It is well-researched and most laudable for its productive use of secondary material. The tremendous breadth of Greco-Roman and Jewish parallels to Galatians are discussed productively. He uses these sources, but is careful to avoid thinking that Paul had to be particularly dependent on any one parallel concept for it to be relevant. Instead, he looks to many views from the ancient world to show context without necessarily implying literary dependence. For example, he argues that the Stoic

distinction between “imitation” and “idolization” is helpful for Paul’s theology of imitation without having to suggest that Paul was somehow dependent upon Stoicism. Similarly, he uses secondary scholarly sources productively with a clear measure of respect for other opinions as well as critical distance from them. He brings up other scholars only when the context is helpful to do so and his point is to show why his position is correct rather than negative rants on why other positions are incorrect. For example, he uses the New Perspective on Paul when he finds it helpful and simply does not engage directly when he politely disagrees.

In form, the commentary has a relatively brief introduction, a contemporary and up-to-date translation, and then is followed by a careful verse-by-verse commentary. Keener’s comments are well informed and are meant to be helpful. He is clearly working closely with the Greek text, but only brings up actual Greek when it is of primary import, for example, the meaning of ὑπὲρ in Galatians 1:4. In addition to the verse-by-verse comments, he also has thirty-four short essays that address particular topics. These academic essays are joined by six short essays entitled “bridging horizons” which are practical. These short essays are not only interesting, but Keener speaks of his own life in these sections that provides some personality to the commentary. Throughout, the commentary is balanced. Because of his positive approach of using sources, the reader is guided deeper into the

reading of Galatians rather than a rehash of Pauline debates between the New Perspective and traditional reading.

There are many themes within the commentary, but one of the most central is the Spirit as a guiding hermeneutic. For many of the central issues of the relationship between Jew and Gentile that govern Galatians, Keener addresses them in the context of the Spirit. He argues that the new creation apocalyptically breaking into the present is evidenced by the reception of the Spirit. As such, a new stage of salvation history has come about and the division between Jew and Gentile can be rethought. He looks to the prophets to see that the coming of the new age was coupled with a renewal of the Spirit. The law, as a *παιδαγωγός*, was a temporary measure in order to preserve the identity of Israel and allow some moral guidance. In that era, it was necessary to become part of ethnic Israel in order to be part of the covenant. In this new era, rather than becoming ethnic members of the people of God by becoming proselyte Jews, Keener argues that Gentiles become “spiritual proselytes.” The Gentiles in Christ are “spiritual children” of Abraham in Galatians 3, and the adoption rhetoric in Galatians 4 is a spiritual adoption that is necessary for both Jews and Gentiles as they need to be adopted into a way of life that depends upon Spirit experience rather than ethnic identity. Nevertheless, he does not hold a theology of supersessionism wherein the church has somehow simply replaced Israel. Instead,

he reads the new community (the “Israel of God”) to be those in Israel who have received the Spirit and thereby retain their particularity as God’s people, while Gentiles, as spiritual proselytes, have been grafted in. Some might critique some of these readings, but Keener’s work should be lauded for how he attempts to combine the “apocalyptic” and “ethnic” arguments of Paul into a unified whole.

While the conversation is thought out, balanced, and has key ideas worth considering, there are some unanswered questions. For example, with respect to the renewal of the Spirit in the prophets, Keener does not address the fact that in these cases, the Spirit was renewed in order to perfectly follow Torah, which seems to be counter to Paul’s larger point. Further, some might disagree with the structure of the “spiritual proselyte” as to whether this is the most helpful structure of thought or if it is robust enough to address the ethnic component of Paul’s argument. Still others might have concerns about the combination of an apocalyptic breaking into the present with salvation history. This should, however, by no means challenge the value of this commentary, though, as commentaries are not fully comprehensive and cannot address every question. In all, this is an accessible commentary that can aid both the laity and clergy in a more careful study of the book of Galatians.

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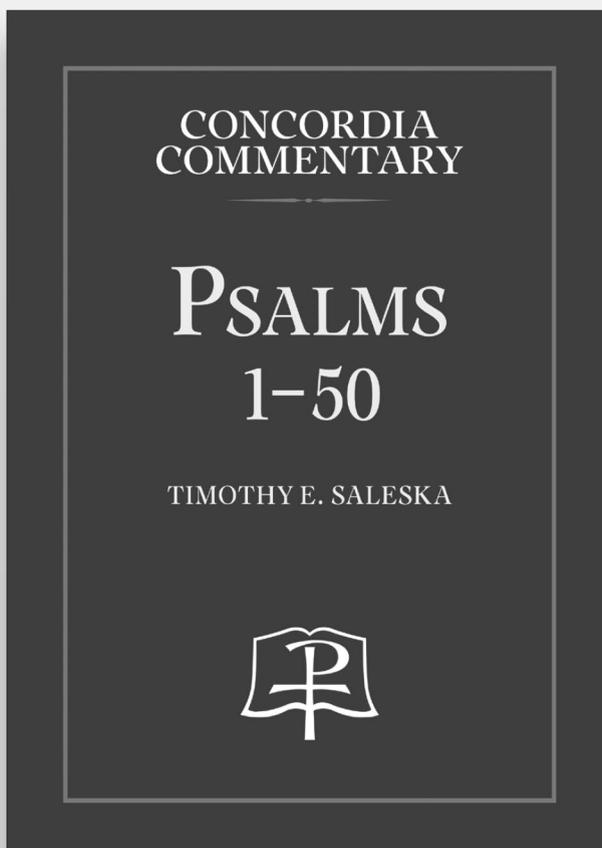
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