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# concordia journal



*On the cover: looking skyward upon the western façade of the historic St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. Photo by Štěpán Vraný on Unsplash.com.*

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# Editor's Note

Every few years, the *Concordia Journal* asks our theological departments to consider a thematic issue that highlights current issues within their field or topics on which faculty in that department are working. A year ago, the Department of Systematic Theology decided to develop an issue on our civic life as Christians given that the American presidential election was only a year away. And with the election, we assumed that people would be thinking and talking about issues in our world today ranging from the economy and foreign affairs to immigration and health care.

Who could have imagined what 2020 would bring and how it would throw so much into turmoil? First, the Covid-19 pandemic spread rapidly around the world as the most dangerous and lethal pandemic since the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. Second, the death of George Floyd while in police custody in Minneapolis sparked protests around the country throughout the summer. On top of all this, the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg reignited debates over the composition of the Supreme Court, and the positive test result for Covid-19 for President Donald Trump put the pandemic into the spotlight once again.

All these events take place within a context in which the hyper-polarization of our country's politics has infected nearly every cultural or social issue leading up to the election in November and, no doubt, beyond November. One cannot help but wonder if this hyper-polarization reflects the growing idolatry of politics as an ultimate value, with the result that political power and winning political power at any cost becomes more important than the political process itself. Even Christians may not be immune to this. In his important book *American Grace*, sociologist Robert Putnam notes that many Christians today are likely to choose a church that agrees with their politics rather than the other way around.

Within this context the articles in this issue of the *Concordia Journal* offer a Lutheran way of thinking theologically about our life as citizens within American society. Joel Biermann's article, "Truth and Unity," as well as Leopoldo Sánchez's article, "Beyond Facebook Love: Luther's Two Kinds of Love and the Immigrant Other" both appeared in the *Festschrift* for President Dale Meyer earlier this summer, and still pertain to this theme of the *Concordia Journal*. Joel Okamoto's article, "Darkness Long in Coming: Christians and the Language of Politics in the Dark" considers the events of this past year and how we might best give a Christian witness within a post-Christian context in which "normal nihilism" characterizes the lives of most Americans (see his article, "When Salt Loses its Saltiness," in the Fall 2018 issue).

In any event, the church finds itself in a more secularized and pluralistic cultural context in the first quarter of the twenty-first century than it did for much of the

twentieth century. How to live as Christians in this culture for the sake of the gospel is one of the most important questions we face today.

*Charles P. Arand*  
*Dean of Theological Research and Publication*

# *Articles*



# Truth and Unity

Joel Biermann



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special interest and emphasis centered on ethics and the correct role of the law in the life of the believer. He also is the faculty marshal. His most recent book is *Wholly Citizens* (Fortress).

Everyone knows that Jesus was nice. And almost everyone knows that people who claim to be followers of Jesus are supposed to act like Jesus. Thus, Christians should be nice. In popular culture, it is part of the standard vocabulary: “acting like a Christian” is the equivalent of being nice. It’s axiomatic; being Christian means

being nice. As one of my seminary professors long ago would lament, in the minds of most people, the church is little more than “nice people telling other nice people how nice it is to be nice.”<sup>1</sup> Today, though, the patent niceness of the church is no longer assumed. The neat syllogism connecting Jesus’s behavior with that of his followers is now widely questioned.

The shift in the popular perception of Christians has been a complaint frequently made in recent years by any number of authors decrying the less-than-Christian reputation of too many who call themselves Christian.<sup>2</sup> There is, of course, an air of truth in the charge—some (maybe, most) who claim the name of Christ certainly struggle with showing the compassion, patience, and kindness of Jesus; and the widely circulated suggestion that Christians are mean-spirited, self-righteous purveyors of

## Editor’s note

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*This article also appears in the book, Let the Gospel Lead: Essays and Sermons in Honor of Dale A. Meyer (Concordia Seminary Press, 2020).*

hate seems too easily confirmed by the likes of the small but very vocal clans of loud and angry protestors who liberally sprinkle Bible verses into their routine litany of vitriol against an all too real smorgasbord of cultural degradation and abomination. Sympathetic as I may be with the concerns of such protestors, their tactics, of course, leave much to be desired. The problem, though, is not that these angry voices somehow tarnish the image of Christians in America. It is not the negative publicity, bad press, or damage to the Christian “brand” that is at stake. Neither is it only social embarrassment or an American-style affirmation of diversity for its own sake that would lead a bona fide follower of Christ to reject the antics typified by the Westboro Baptists. More basically, it’s a failure to follow Christ that is the real problem that concerns me.

The failure to follow Christ is often a problem—a big problem. For Christians struggling to live in the uncomfortable tension of being *simul justus et peccator* it is, in a way, always the fundamental problem. Still, following Christ is hardly simply a matter of being nice. Neither should Christians concede the least credence to the notion that the world has even the slightest authority to define for them what it looks like to follow Christ. Jesus has done that for us; and being nice doesn’t seem to have been a high priority. Jesus certainly caused his share of offense—it seems that sometimes he did so quite deliberately.<sup>3</sup> Christians causing offense in the world, then, is not the problem—actually, it’s to be expected.<sup>4</sup>

A man cannot follow Christ without generating his own share of offense—especially in a world that idolizes the self-actualized autonomous individuals who choose and pursue whatever realities they like, and then expect, nay demand, the approval and affirmation of all. Those who follow Christ as Lord of all, and insist that he is the only way, truth, and life for all, and that no one comes to the Father except through him alone can expect a great deal of indignant pushback from the world around. Christians must reject the temptation to garner the love of the world by rethinking and recasting the doctrine which has been entrusted to them in ways more tolerant and so more palatable to a world rushing relentlessly into the illusory, ever-brighter realms of enlightenment. Frankly, I have little sympathy for the handwringers agonizing over the plummeting poll numbers of Christians in America and preoccupied with outsiders’ inaccurate perceptions of churchgoers. Christians need not to give much thought to what non-Christians think of them; what matters is the judgment of One. What matter is what God thinks; and the question that needs to be asked—and asked often—is not whether the world thinks we are nice enough, but whether those who claim to follow Christ are actually following him.

Let’s ask that question, then. But, notwithstanding the direction of the first paragraphs of this short essay, let’s ask the question not in the broad context of the Christian in the world and what it would look like for a believer to follow Christ in interactions with unbelievers encountered each day. Rather, let’s start closer to home,

narrow the field of vision, and think about the believer's behavior within the confines of the Christian community. When it comes to the way that Christian people relate to other Christian people, are we following Christ?

At first blush, the question might seem superficial and even a little silly. Of course, Christians treat one another in Christian ways. Surely, of all places, gatherings of Christians should be marked by a surfeit of niceness with plenty enough to go around. But while it is no doubt true that the practiced politeness and ordinary pleasantries of decent society are typically on full display within the church, I think there is room to wonder about the degree and quality of Christlikeness at work in the interactions of Christian people. Indeed, I am confident that most readers would consider it altogether unnecessary that an argument be mounted to substantiate my bald claim that Christians don't always treat one another in particularly Christian ways. Even if some may question the veracity of the claim, what cannot be questioned is that Christians should treat one another in Christian ways. I have used the term churchmanship to describe this appeal that Christians actually follow the teaching and example of Christ as they interact with one another in the work and life of the church. I think the word captures the idea that those who are joined to one another in the bonds of a common confession of Christ should certainly reflect Christ in their life together. Good churchmanship is the Christlike attitude and behavior we owe one another within the church.

It would be unnecessarily taxing for both writer and reader to attempt an exhaustive presentation of the scriptural teaching on what constitutes good churchmanship. It is not difficult, though, to gain a robust idea from a quick sampling of texts. One could start with the rather obvious directive from Paul to his Philippian readers as he urges the pursuit of humility: "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5). And, then support the point with his exhortation to the Corinthians: "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). The connection is drawn irrefutably. Jesus is example. The standard that norms and guides Christian interaction is Christ himself. Upon this critical foundation, we can establish our understanding of churchmanship. The work is not difficult. One does not need to search for long in the Pauline corpus to find specific direction to guide and fill out the practice of Christlike thinking in the context of the church. A recurrent theme for Paul is a strong and potent emphasis on the spirit of unity, encouragement, and mutual responsibility that is to characterize the community of his people. A few passages that particularly highlight this theme are Romans 12:9–16 ("Let love be without hypocrisy. . . . Be devoted to one another in brotherly love"), Colossians 3:12–17 ("Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another"), and Galatians 6:1–4 ("Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ"). The point is as simply stated as it is difficult to practice: Christians should live together in a life

*Good churchmanship is the practice of deliberately choosing to treat every other Christian as, above all, a brother or sister in Christ.*

normed by love grounded in the gospel of Christ and active in self-denying service that affirms, strengthens, and nourishes not only the body of Christ, but each individual disciple of Christ. That's what I would term good churchmanship.

Following the example of Christ and taking seriously Paul's appeals to humility, self-denial, and a commitment to the upbuilding of the

family of Christ, suggests a number of corollary exhortations. Good churchmanship is the practice of deliberately choosing to treat every other Christian as, above all, a brother or sister in Christ . . . and never as an adversary, annoyance, threat, or tool. Sadly, even this statement of the obvious seems too often to be neglected or outright rejected in the actual conduct of our life together in the body of Christ; but more on that later.

Another way of expressing the practice of good churchmanship emphasizes the uniquely Christ-like aspects of the church that is distinguished from all other human relationships or organizations. The church is not only the family of Christ, but his very body. This exalted and utterly unique status is true only of the church. The practice of good churchmanship, then, is the intentional choice made by Christians to regard other Christians not only as fellow disciples of Christ and as brothers and sisters in the faith, but as various and unique members of the one body of Christ. Each person, as Paul teaches us, is received, appreciated, valued, and treated as an essential member or part of Christ's body. We are together fellow heirs of God's grace; we are not merely business partners, participants in a labor union, or fellow members of a club or venerable institution. We are members of the church, body parts of Christ. In other words, and to sharpen the point a bit more, the life of Christians together is normed and directed by the rule of selfless love, longsuffering sacrifice, and mutual concern and not by statutes, constitutions, bylaws, negotiations, and arbitration. Every action, word, and attitude evident in the life of a follower of Christ should seek conformity not to a legal agreement, accepted code of conduct, or binding contract, but to the law of mutual love and respect among fellow disciples as exemplified in Christ and urged by Paul.

My concern based on hard experience is that all I am arguing may seem so patently true and obvious that the import of these truths and the difference they should make for the way that we actually function in our ecclesiastical life together is missed. Permit me, then, to press forward with yet more elaboration in the hope that the picture becomes compelling and the argument formative. Christians practicing

good churchmanship are not content to live and let live; instead, they work to root out division, animosity, and strife within the body of Christ. As Christians we do not have the option of ignoring one another. Rather, we must tirelessly labor to find and pursue any means possible to reduce tensions and resolve conflicts with others in the faith. We cannot shelter behind the protection of bylaws, proof-texts, or institutional precedents while discord or conflict festers in the body. Yes, it is true that like the Lord, the church is a unique union of fully human and fully divine realities. But we must never use the fully human aspect of the church to norm or dictate our life together or to serve as an excuse for succumbing to corporate and bureaucratic ways of operating. This is exactly the argument made by Kurt Marquart when he rightly extended the definition of church well beyond local congregations to include also synods and by extension districts and circuits:

It is precisely as *churches* that synods are controlled by faith and love, and therefore cannot tyrannize anybody. The more this churchly constitution and its constraints are forgotten and replaced by political notions of majority rule and commercial chains of command, the more scope there is for worldly, carnal power and all its works.<sup>5</sup>

The implications of this position are enormous, challenging, and perhaps not a little unsettling. When dealing with another Christian over some misunderstanding, dispute, or disagreement, the question of how to proceed must be driven not by technicalities and careful adherence to institutional—even synodical—guidelines and rules, but instead by the desire to share love, compassion, trust, and a willingness even to suffer personal loss if only there might be some way to enhance and build up the other believer. Good churchmanship is marked not by facility in Robert's Rules of Order or strict adherence to the minutiae of institutional bylaws, but by a tenacious zeal to assume the best about another, a refusal to speak ill of another, and by a yearning to resolve any apparent disputes as quickly and simply as possible without calculating what might personally be threatened or lost in the process. Treating one another as fellow members of Christ assumes that when a discussion is necessary for the sake of the community's health it is carried out not in public or in print but in person. And whether a face-to-face meeting, or one facilitated by some technology, the necessary conversation will in every case be accomplished in a spirit of generous love and affirmation that is keenly aware of the presence of Christ himself as the third participant.

Good churchmanship is treating one another the way that Christ treated people and continues to treat us. This way of living in the church has become sadly uncommon and has been replaced too often by ways of functioning that bear an unfortunate resemblance to the power struggles within corporations and halls of

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government, or among rival neighbors. God calls us to live not according to the rules of constitutions and contract, but according to the law of love. Christians don't follow bylaws, they follow Christ. So lofty a standard must not be summarily dismissed as unattainable idealism—rather, it must be the lived reality that animates the life of the church. This is the sort of churchmanship presently in short

supply but desperately needed in the life of our church, today.

None of this is easy. Francis Pieper acknowledged as much in his dogmatics. The greatest difficulty is basic and pervasive: the problem is us. “Carnal ambition, envy, personal likes and dislikes, are continually threatening to cause factions and division in the local churches, in the synods, and in the church federations.”<sup>6</sup> In the Apology, Melancthon, classically, makes a similar observation: “And many heresies have arisen in the church simply from the hatred of the teachers.”<sup>7</sup> As in so many areas of the believer's struggle to live a sanctified life in defiance of a sinful nature—that though drowned daily with each morning's baptismal renewal, refuses to die—the temptation is to become comfortable with the *simul* and learn to accommodate the sinful reality. The church cannot become a harbor for or even accomplice to selfish, sinful behavior, and Christians must learn to recognize and admit the pride and self-promotion within themselves that drives so much of the turmoil, vitriol, and discord that seems constantly to roil the church. Working to curb and curtail division matters, because unity matters.

In a climate focused on preserving truth and advancing confessional purity, it is sometimes forgotten that the sin of doctrinal permissiveness that might eventuate in unionism is only one side of the wretched, corroded coin. On the opposite side of that coin is the equally damning sin of schism. Pieper himself warns against this sin, albeit with a scant two sentences in his three-volume dogmatics. Here are both of them:

By the term “schism” we mean a division in the Church which God's Word does not enjoin, but which is begun by men for carnal reasons and therefore is sinful, e.g. a separation because of differences in church customs, church terms, order of worship, etc. In practice it is important to distinguish between schismatics acting from spite and schismatics acting from weakness in Christian knowledge and prejudice.”<sup>8</sup>

Pieper's short list of examples echoes the standard list of ordinary adiaphora. In both

cases the point is the same: one should not raise to the level of settled doctrine or essential confession a practice, belief, or conviction that is only a matter of taste, tradition, or training. And one definitely must not allow such things to become cause for division or strife within the church. Were that sad possibility to become reality, it would be evidence not of careful doctrine but, harsh as it may sound, of carnal desires. Carnal desires, it needs to be remembered are not limited only to fleshly indulgences but may also manifest themselves in assorted forms of self-promotion or even self-preservation masquerading behind a countless variety of costumes including nostalgia, honoring the past, a love of beauty, a yearning for relevance, a need for security, and so forth.

With the main point of this essay now in sight, permit me first to make an obvious but important observation: division in the church is a great evil. Yes, when—as especially in the days of the Reformation—another believer or group of believers holds to a teaching at odds with the church’s confession, division becomes sadly necessary. Yet, even then it is certainly not a good thing. And when division arises in the church for any other reason than the preservation of doctrinal truth, and so the gospel, it is unequivocally unacceptable. It is sin. This is as true of divisions that slice off entirely new denominations as well as divisions that stretch, strain, and splinter the bonds of a congregation that at least in name and by outward appearances remains one. Schism is sin. Disunity is sin. Unity in the church matters. Treating one another like Christian brothers and sisters matters. Your fellow Christian is not your enemy—not ever.

Of course, no one is likely to argue with any of this; it’s never a good idea to set oneself at odds with clear scriptural teaching. Neither can it be forgotten that there is a limit to the unity mandate. Church unity certainly is not, as some seem to think, the equivalent of the gospel itself, nor is it the essence of church teaching. As already noted, when another believer or group of believers embraces false teaching that jeopardizes the confession of Christ and his gospel, the error must be addressed. And if the error continues with deliberate resolve, unity has already been fractured by the one holding the false teaching. In that case, then, one must sadly acknowledge the division, and then press on in the tension between a yearning for the joy and celebration of true unity with all who follow Christ and a love for all of God’s truth given to us in what Paul calls the traditions passed down to us.<sup>9</sup> Living carefully in tensions is, I am convinced, the hallmark of a faithful theologian.<sup>10</sup> But, the tension between fully celebrating Christian unity and fully confessing all of God’s truth is especially difficult. Unlike other tensions in Christian teaching that are essential truths inherent within reality itself (such as the two natures of Christ or God’s one nature in three persons) the tension between realizing and enjoying full Christian unity at every level and the need to preserve and promote the faithful teaching of all the *regula fidei* is not inherent within God’s reality but a detestable byproduct of imperfect communities populated from first to last by sinful people.

To say that not all Christians agree on the best way to navigate the tension between truth and unity would be an understatement. But this is nothing new. It bears remembering that the tension between holding on to unity and holding on to right teaching did not begin in the sixteenth century with Luther's insistence on right doctrine that eventuated in the disastrous, but I am certainly convinced necessary, division of the western church. The fact that there was already a *western* Christendom is reminder enough of the old struggle between unity and truth. And, of course, the very fact that there are, no doubt, many who would be quick to label Luther's actions as the fruit of selfish ambition or sinful stubbornness (in other words, *carnal desires*) simply highlights the difficulty of sorting out the right way to handle this painful duality between preserving unity and preserving truth. The questions are rarely simply or obviously answered.

Interested as I am in pressing forward more fully to think through the truths and practices that might help us better address the messiness and heartache of this tragic tension that continues to burden Christ's church with painful divisions, that work obviously exceeds the limits of an essay. My objective in these pages is more modest, but no less important. My call for a more deliberate decision to work to preserve unity is aimed more narrowly, at all of us who by willing subscription are bound to live together with one another in a celebration of unity, outwardly displayed in every possible way, that is rooted in our common confession (and a *quia* one at that!) of *The Book of Concord*.

It is within the confines of our common Lutheran confession that I am appealing for a heightened appreciation of unity. It seems, though, that even within this happy confession division is too readily accepted and even at times encouraged. But, always, of course, with the best of motives and the purest justifications. Certainly, unity in the church is all well and good and should be desired, it is acknowledged . . . that is, until the gospel is at stake. When the gospel is on the line, as we know, everything changes. When the gospel is threatened, unity takes a back seat. When the gospel is at stake, even the rules demanding civility, patience, and long-suffering can be tossed away as temporarily irrelevant. An emergency situation demands extenuating rules and directives. When the gospel is under attack, good churchmanship, it seems, becomes optional. "The gospel is at stake," is always trump and wins every hand. Nothing can stand against it. And, isn't it fascinating that somehow, even within our own common confession of the faith, in the case of any dissension between us and in every conflict it turns out that the gospel is, in fact, always at stake.

Invoke the cause of the gospel and any unkind behavior, every accusing attitude, every alienating action, and every divisive deed is excused as necessary—in fact not only necessary but holy and exemplary. For the sake of the gospel, one does what one must do, even if that means splitting the church in two, or just endorsing one more faction. Again, I am well aware of, and eternally grateful for, those faithful followers

of Christ who did defend the truth of the gospel even at the expense of church unity when the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone was genuinely at stake. This difficult course is exemplified, I believe, in the work of Luther and Melancthon and all the reformers, who selflessly and humbly confessed what needed to be confessed and practiced what needed to be practiced for the sake of the gospel and its clear proclamation and delivery to broken and helpless sinners. Still, the path that leads to division is hardly normative or the default course for every conflict, and it cannot be invoked to excuse what is in fact, nothing but the work of schism. The question remains and must always be asked in each situation when the “for the sake of the gospel” axiom is invoked: is it true, is the gospel, in fact, actually at stake? Does the situation fomenting division and excusing disunity actually threaten the gospel and justify the breach that may eventuate in a rupture of unity?

The unfortunate truth is that in our life together as God’s people—even within our common confession—the stresses, tensions, disagreements, and conflicts that inevitably arise are too often attended by unchristian behavior that is excused in the name of guarding the gospel. To preserve self-chosen goals, justify attitudes, and elevate actions that might otherwise be seen as harsh, hurtful, destructive to unity, and finally schismatic, there is no better recourse than to raise the cry, “For the sake of the gospel.” Such a tactic immediately issues the schismatic a free pass to continue the fracturing behavior.

In deference to Pieper’s counsel, and to honor the art of charity, it is certainly right to put the best construction on the motives and intentions of those causing turmoil and division in the name of the gospel’s preservation. Not only is it generous and kind, but it is right to assume the best and concede to those who stir up strife and defend divisiveness the pure heart of a wholesome and well-intended motive driven only by their love for doctrinal fidelity and zeal for the truth. But, granting the purity and nobility of motive does not mean also granting immunity from accountability for actions and exemption from challenges that question those actions. Even the very best, selfless, unblemished intentions do not excuse sinful behavior and certainly do not justify the tragedy of schism. Intentions and motivations—regardless the degree of their goodness, holiness, and purity—are not the criteria for determining the rightness of a behavior or the wisdom of a word. To judge a person’s words and deeds one only needs to consider whether those words and deeds align with God’s truth. Motives are irrelevant. To be schismatic, regardless the motive, is to sin.

Naturally, this raises another complicated problem of who exactly decides what aligns with God’s truth and when and whether the gospel is actually at stake in any given situation. But the labyrinth that necessarily follows that question need not trap us or distract us. Acknowledging the complex interrelationships of natural law, revealed divine command, confessional symbols, and the church’s essential role in interpreting and teaching all of this, it is enough to recognize that no one does this

work in isolation. We are all beholden to Scripture, the *regula fidei* springing from the revelation of God in human flesh, and in our circles also by a *quia* subscription to the *Book of Concord*. Within Christ's church we hold one another accountable to teach and walk in the way of life that follows Christ. And unless one is ready to take on the mantle of "hero of faith" and claim direct revelation from God at odds with what has been revealed and taught in the *regula fidei* and Confessions, it is the mark of wisdom, humility, and true churchmanship not to assert oneself as the final authority but rather to yield to the consensus of the collective church and the cautions

*To be schismatic is not to be right and true, but to be sinful.*

it issues. The challenge, as I see it, is not determining who decides what constitutes God's truth; the challenge is assuring that we in the church are attending carefully to all that Christ calls us to do as his people within Scripture and as articulated in our Confessions.

In this process of discernment and within our own small corner of a small room within Christ's church called faithful Lutheranism—a corner indelibly formed in the crucible of sharp conflict in every century of her existence—perhaps we need to value unity a bit more highly than we have in the past. Perhaps it is necessary for the sake of unity that we not be so quick to excuse unkindness, accept divisions, and embrace factions for the sake of idiosyncratic or groupish notions of veracity. To be schismatic is not to be right and true, but to be sinful. It is not easy to maintain the tension between unity and truth—nor is there an agreed consensus in our circles on what, and where, lines should be drawn rightly to maintain that tension. But, the tension does need to be maintained, and in our part of Christ's church we would do well to remember what may be the less familiar, Christian unity, side of the tension.<sup>11</sup>

In the event that any might remain unpersuaded by my argument I will offer two final pieces of evidence, one scriptural and one confessional. My first exhibit is from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome—a church, perhaps several congregations, that he had not founded but was eager to visit and to serve. In the last chapters of his epistle, Paul takes up some of the practical problems besetting the believers of his day: being subject to government, living righteously in a dissolute culture, and tensions between Christians over questions of both teaching and practice.<sup>12</sup> On the surface, the last of these concerns was a conflict over food and holy days; but underneath the superficial issues about vegetables and calendars there was a maelstrom of swirling questions and debates growing out of the often turbulent interface of Jewish and Gentile believers who were learning to follow one Lord together. What was at stake in the dispute was nothing less than the nature of the Christian faith itself.

No one could claim to be surprised, then, had Paul declared to his Roman readers that in this debate the gospel was at stake and then urged the faithful believers to

resist and rebuke those who were hanging on to habits and ways of thinking that belonged to another way of life, indeed another faith entirely. Of course, when Paul wrote to his own spiritual children, those he brought to faith in Galatia, this was precisely the direction of the counsel he gave. But this is not the course that Paul urges in his letter to the Romans; in fact, he insists on the opposite. The apostle encourages a longsuffering, patient, almost indulgent course in regard to those who were sure that Christians needed to avoid certain foods or observe certain days—at best a legalistic way of thinking about the faith that was clearly at odds with the gospel itself. Considering what was at stake, it is extraordinary that Paul would advocate such charitable tolerance. Granted, we don't know the specific circumstances in Rome or Galatia and are able to do little more than speculate about what relevant factors led Paul to give the peculiar counsel he did in each case. But what is clear, and clear in both of these letters of Paul, is that unity in the church was of paramount importance. Unity was absolutely vital and not to be forfeited. Paul would not risk, let alone sacrifice, the unity of the Roman Christians merely for the sake of Christian liberty's free exercise, or to combat a bit of fuzzy teaching about the place of Jewish traditions, or even to safeguard against a possibly dangerous encroachment on the pure gospel itself. There is no doubt that the contention over meat and festivals touched on significant matters of doctrine. So, what does Paul exhort his readers to do?

Accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. . . . let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way . . . accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. (Rom 14:1, 13, 15:7)

Clearly, Paul placed the highest importance on the church's unity, and to that end exhorted Christians to treat one another like Christians. The point, here, naturally, is to ask ourselves what sort of reception the "weak" brothers in Rome, with all of their hyper-sensitivity about things indifferent and with their obvious doctrinal deficiencies so dangerous to right teaching, would receive if they suddenly appeared and started raising their concerns in our midst, today. No doubt, the cry, "the gospel is at stake," would seem entirely justified, but what about Paul's own cry, "Unity is at stake"? Yes, of course, true unity is always unity in teaching, and that was obviously Paul's desire for the Romans—but, heeding Paul's counsel, how much should we learn to tolerate, accept, and overlook on the long road to the celebration of full unity? The tension is maintained only with the most deliberate and persistent effort.<sup>13</sup>

Like Paul, Melancthon also urged Christians to cultivate the skills of peacemaking and enduring with patience the foibles and failings of other believers. And while it might be tempting to dismiss the pleas of Melancthon as too likely stemming from his infamously overly irenic spirit and so hopelessly tainted, these

pleas are packaged in the Apology—part of that *quia* subscription. In his meticulous effort to confront and correct the scriptural misinterpretations of his papal opponents, Melanchthon offers a right reading of 1 Peter 4:8, “Love covers a multitude of sins.” This verse has nothing to do with our sins before God, Melanchthon argues, but everything to do with the way we treat one another in our human interactions. The verse touches our lives *coram mundo* not *coram Deo*:

Thus, this text does not speak about one’s own sins, but of others’ when it says, “love covers sins,” namely, the sins of others, more precisely offenses between people. That is to say, even though these offenses flare up, love conceals them, forgives, yields, and does not carry everything to the fullest extent of the law.<sup>14</sup>

This exhortation has particular application for the church, as Melanchthon makes clear: “For this virtue is necessary for preserving public harmony, which cannot last long unless pastors and churches overlook and pardon many things among themselves.”<sup>15</sup> It is the practice of *epieikeia* or “fairness” that needs to be cultivated among Christians. It is the practice of what I would call good churchmanship that needs to be cultivated among Christians.

Christ is the Lord of his church. Those who are called into his church are to follow their Lord with resolute purpose. Obviously, faithful following demands a hearty defense of God’s truth—all of it. But, just as obviously, faithful following means a hearty defense of Christian unity and the careful preservation of the fellowship that is given and entrusted to us by the work of the Spirit sent by our Lord. Doctrine matters and unity matters. They are certainly not mutually exclusive; and yet this side of the eschaton, the one who rightly treasures both will inevitably find himself caught in a significant and often difficult tension. It is a tension worth holding. It is a tension rightly held only by the practice of genuine Christian love and compassion for one another in the body of Christ—in other words, the practice of good churchmanship. Those who live striving to honor and attain such lofty standards cannot fail to provide a profound witness to the world—regardless what the world may think of that witness. What counts, after all, is the judgment only of Christ whom we follow.

## Endnotes

- 1 Those who walked among the Gothic buildings of Concordia, St. Louis in my generation will immediately recognize the aphorism as originating from the sizable collection of such phrases regularly cited by Horace Hummel.
- 2 The practice of exposing and chiding Christians for their bad behavior toward the world was perhaps launched by the Barna Group, see: David Kinnaman, *Uncbristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2007).
- 3 Consider his handling of the scribes and Pharisees in Luke 11 or his unabashed affront to those seemingly ready to follow him in John 6.
- 4 John 15:19, I John 3:13.
- 5 Kurt E. Marquart, *The Church: and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance*. Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, ed. Robert D. Preus, (Ft. Wayne, IN: International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990), 203.
- 6 Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* Vol. I (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 34.
- 7 Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 157 (Ap IV, 242).
- 8 Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* Vol. III (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 427.
- 9 See I Corinthians 11:1, 2 Thessalonians 2:15.
- 10 See my discussion in *Wholly Citizens: God's Two Realms and Christian Engagement with the World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2017), xi–xviii.
- 11 I have often wondered about the possible correlation between an apparent lack of trust and camaraderie among LCMS clergy today, and the late twentieth-century breakdown of “the system” that used to unite the synod’s future pastors for eight or even twelve years of dormitory-based education. Such compelled life together can be instrumental in fostering bonds of trust and respect, lost in an educational system with three years spent with classmates, and only a minority of them living together on campus. Given these realities, the need to work resolutely for unity is that much greater.
- 12 Romans 13–15.
- 13 Without venturing foolishly into the deep waters of thorough exegesis, I would suggest that it might also be wise to consider the often cited and much debated verse from Romans 16:17 in light of the tenor of the preceding two chapters. Could it be that those “who cause dissensions” are from the “strong” group with “good” doctrine but a judgmental, impatient and so “bad” attitude toward the “weak” brothers and thus actually violating the teaching they had received from Paul?
- 14 Kolb, Wengert, 157 (Ap IV, 242).
- 15 *Ibid.*, (Ap IV, 243).



# Beyond Facebook Love Luther's Two Kinds of Love and the Immigrant Other

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Reflecting on his marginality as a Christian academic who has experienced both sides of the cultural animosity and “mutual suspicion” in the United States between “evangelical Christians” and “secular academics,” Alan Jacobs observes that “everyone today seems to have an RCO [*repugnant cultural other*], and everyone’s RCO is on social media somewhere.”<sup>1</sup> He argues that this state

of affairs leads to “a profoundly unhealthy situation . . . because it prevents us from recognizing others as our neighbors.”<sup>2</sup> In our politically divided times, Jacobs aptly describes the current situation and suggests a challenging way forward.

The cold divisive logic of the RCO impoverishes us, all of us, and brings us closer to that primitive state that the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes called “the war of every man against every man.” We can do better; we should do better. And I believe, thanks in part to my years of negotiating mutually hostile communities, I can help. I know what it’s like to make common cause with people who are in some ways alien to me; I know how such experiences can

## Editor’s note

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expand my understanding of the world; I know how they can force me to confront the narrowness of my vision and my tendency to simplistic thinking—sometimes to not thinking at all.<sup>3</sup>

In various countries across the globe, including the United States, questions dealing with the status of refugees and immigrants are among the most hotly debated. A 2018 Pew Research Center survey found that 51% of Americans say the United States “has a responsibility to accept refugees into the country, while 43% say it does not.”<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy that the opinions of “white evangelical Protestants” and the “religiously unaffiliated”—two groups suspicious of one another—on this issue are evenly divided, with 68% of the former being against and 65% of the latter in favor

*Tribal thinking prevents dialogue with others who may think differently from us, drawing each side into its own corner and club.*

of greater acceptance of refugees.<sup>5</sup> The same survey reveals a similar divide along political affiliations, with 26% of Republicans and 74% of Democrats arguing that the nation should take responsibility for accepting refugees.<sup>6</sup> In distinction from refugees fleeing war or violence, we also see polarization along party lines on immigration policy. For instance, a 2019 Pew survey shows that, whereas 91% and

83% of Republicans favor increasing border security and deportations respectively, only 49% and 31% of Democrats are for more border enforcement and deportations respectively.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, while 82% of Democrats approve finding a path for allowing unauthorized immigrants to remain in the country, only 48% of Republicans consider this policy goal as important in immigration reform. With some exceptions, attitudes and opinions concerning the immigrant other in the United States reflect the political polarization of our times.

At times, these political divisions and allegiances trickle into our churches, arguably dressed in theological language, calling for an either-or position on complex issues that require more nuance: “What about *illegal* do you not understand?,” some say. Others respond, “what about *loving the neighbor as yourself* do you not understand?” My point is that these questions are often asked by Christians as if they were absolute contrasting political and thus theological options, rather than starting points of departure for rich conversations that may foster productive dialogue and action. In a Facebook world where people typically “like” those with whom they already agree, we can easily fall prey to framing theological questions on debated social issues in terms of allegiance to or affinity with one’s tribe. In this case, the drive for social acceptance or justification in one’s group gets in the way of thinking generously with others.<sup>8</sup> Tribal thinking prevents dialogue with others who may

think differently from us, drawing each side into its own corner and club. We miss an opportunity to come together for the sake of understanding complex issues and, if possible, working together on them.

In the shuffle of identity politics and tribally framed theological responses to complex social issues such as immigration law and reform, an interesting thing takes place: The refugee and immigrant neighbor, her struggles and hopes, becomes invisible. Worse yet, such neighbors are placed or subsumed under the preferred categories of this or that tribe, that is to say, under categories such as legality-illegality (“what about illegal do you not understand?) or hostility-hospitality (“what about loving your neighbor as yourself do you not understand?). All the same, the stranger neighbor, the immigrant other, is not approached on his own terms, but rather in terms of a prior ethic whereby people “like” those with whom they have some affinity or perhaps can benefit from in some way, and “unlike,” so to speak, those whom they see as undesirable, unattractive, or of no benefit (a burden) to our way of life. The church can do better; we should do better.

In this essay, I argue that Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation’s distinction between human love and divine love (or the love of the cross) offers a way to form theologians with the capacity to deal with neighbors beyond what an ethic of affinity (an ethic of Facebook love, so to speak) allows, fostering a Christlike ethic that tends toward that which is unattractive or unlikable.<sup>9</sup> I show how Luther’s distinction reveals that discourses on the refugee and immigrant other in contemporary immigration debates, on both sides of the political divide, are often based on a utilitarian ethic grounded in and reduced to human love. I suggest that, although there is a place for human love when discussing the politics of immigration in a secular society (such as the love for country or fellow citizens), Christians must also move beyond it by embodying ways of engaging the refugee and immigrant other through a cruciform ethic of divine love that does not only point out the bad in people but bestows the good on them. Through a brief comparison between Luther’s earlier Heidelberg Disputation (1518) and some of his reflections on Abraham’s hospitality written later in his *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545), we also show how his principle that the love of the cross bestows good upon the poor and needy person is consistent throughout his career—even if articulated in different ways. I conclude with some ways of exercising an ethic of divine love in our dialogue with others with whom we disagree politically on a complex social issue like immigration, in a way that the refugee and immigrant neighbors affected by such dialogue do not fall between the cracks but are properly accounted for.

### ***Loving Like a Theologian of the Cross: Two Kinds of Love in Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation (1518)***

In his book *Two Kinds of Love*, Toumo Mannermaa makes the bold claim that

Luther's distinction between "God's Love" (*Jumalan rakkaus*) and "Human Love" (*Ihmisen rakkaus*) provides the fundamental framework that "determines the basic structure of Luther's theology."<sup>10</sup> Although Luther's distinction between two kinds of love appears early on in his career in the last thesis of the Heidelberg Disputation, the author observes that such distinction does not only lay out the interpretative key for the rest of the Disputation but is the theological presupposition in Luther's whole outlook on God, humanity, faith, the word, worship, and ethics.

In thesis 28 of the Disputation, Luther writes: "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it."<sup>11</sup> We can restate the second half of this thesis as follows: Humans love people with whom they share attributes they see (or want to see) in themselves—attributes they are already naturally attracted to and thus see as pleasing. In his explanation of this thesis, Luther elaborates on the type of pleasing attributes natural human reason or intellect seeks in others. According to many theologians of his day, those attributes are "the true and good" in people.

The intellect cannot by nature comprehend an object which does not exist, that is the poor and needy person, but only a thing which does exist, that is the true and good. Therefore it judges according to appearances, is a respecter of persons, and judges according to that which can be seen, etc.<sup>12</sup>

What is under attack in this statement is what Luther sees as "the argument held by . . . 'all' philosophers and theologians that the cause of love is always in its object."<sup>13</sup> The object the natural human intellect seeks after is, as Luther notes, "the true and good." But by looking for "the true and good" in people, human love paradoxically misses and even dismisses "the poor and needy person." According to scholastic theology, humans are naturally inclined and driven to love others with whom they have in common the goodness they see (or want to realize more fully) in themselves.<sup>14</sup> We may call this, love by affinity. Even Thomas Aquinas's notion of "friendship love," by which one loves another without self-interest, is still oriented toward mutually sharing with friends things one has in common with them, or things one likes in them.<sup>15</sup> In other words, when it comes to human love, like is attracted to like. Like likes like. Facebook love!

In a teaching with roots in Augustine's trinitarian theology, medieval scholastics like Thomas taught that humans are naturally disposed toward goodness because they are created in their own essence after the image of God in whom all the perfections of goodness exist. There is a similarity between God and humans in that humans possess attributes of the Creator, though in a creaturely way—attributes such as wisdom, justice, and goodness. Therefore, human love ideally reflects God's love, and vice versa, which means that God too loves people because they have something in

common with him; in Thomas's words, "God loves the object in proportion to the degree to which its proper goodness has become actualized."<sup>16</sup> In other words, God loves you to the extent that you reflect his goodness, his likeness in you. God may initiate this work in you, and work with you to get you there, but the same principle of affinity applies.

According to Mannermaa, "Luther concludes that in scholastic theology, which follows the logic of Aristotle, the image of God has been changed into the likeness of the human image and human beings, and thus in accordance with Human Love."<sup>17</sup> The overall picture one gets from the theology Luther reacts against is the idea that human love reflects or images divine love (or more precisely, divine attributes), so that both types of love seek after the true and good they are naturally attracted to. In the case of humans, they strive to do so constantly; in the case of God, he does so perfectly. In either case, the implication is that, by loving people as objects of goodness who best reflect divine attributes in a creaturely way, both God and humans seek to love others to the degree that their works (or righteousness), free will, or reason are deemed good.

In thesis 19 of the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther states: "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom 1:20]."<sup>18</sup> In his explanation of this thesis, Luther uses the term "the invisible things of God" to refer to divine attributes such as "virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, and so forth."<sup>19</sup> Note that these are precisely the type of attributes that humans—or as Luther would call them, theologians of glory!—naturally seek in themselves or in others as objects of love. In other words, theologians of glory seek after those "invisible qualities" of God that they find or perceive to be visible, apparent, or reflected in themselves or in others, which in turn justifies their being loved by God or their loving others in God's name.

How then is natural human love overcome with God's love in humans? It does not happen naturally, or by human initiative. For Luther, loving according to God's love requires nothing less than an act of God's Spirit to create out of nothing a new person with a new heart or disposition—a person who will not only love those whom he naturally likes, but more importantly, those who are not easy to like. But this change of heart means the old person (sinner) in us must come to an end. In his reflections on the Disputation, Gerhard Forde observes that the point of Luther's theological theses is to show how God forms theologians of the cross who die in order to be raised with Christ.<sup>20</sup> Forde's claim that the cross is above all an attack on "*our spiritual aspirations*,"<sup>21</sup> on "*the sinner's theology* . . . the *best* we have to offer, not the worst,"<sup>22</sup> aligns well with Luther's critique of human love as a natural inclination toward finding the invisible, spiritual, and good qualities of God in ourselves and others. As Mannermaa puts it, "the theology of glory is based on Human Love."<sup>23</sup>

Accordingly, theologians of glory focus on the beauty of their works to make them righteous before God, their free will (or right choices) to avoid sin, and their rational ability to know God's invisible attributes through what they observe in creation. Therefore, they also love those with whom they share such a high view of their spiritual capacity. When used to establish one's or others' worthiness to be loved by God, gifts from God which are "good" in themselves (that is, good works, the will, and reason) nevertheless become "mortal sins" or "evil" in that they drive us toward that self-realizing love which looks for what is attractive in us and others, and thus away from God's creative love in Christ toward us and in us.<sup>24</sup>

Theologians of the cross, on the other hand, are humbly receptive by faith to God's works, will, and revelation (reason) in the crucified Christ—that is, they receive what appears "evil" in the eyes of the world but is ultimately "good" for us.<sup>25</sup> They die to their human attempts to earn the love of God so that they can be raised anew as receivers of God's unmerited love in Christ. If we interpret the Disputation from the lens of the two types of love, we conclude that human love, which naturally looks for "that which is pleasing to it," must be put to death in us, so that the love of God "which does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it" might shape us to love that which is not naturally attractive to us. This means moving from a view of divine love based on imaging divine attributes to a view of divine love based on imaging Christ's love for the marginal neighbor, that is, sinners, the poor, and the needy. In his explanation to thesis 28, Luther defines "the love of the cross" as follows:

Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive. For this reason the love of man avoids sinners and evil persons. Thus Christ says: "For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" [Mt 9:13]. This is the love of the cross, born of the cross, which turns in the direction where it does not find good which it may enjoy, but where it may confer good upon the bad and needy person. "It is more blessed to give than to receive" [Acts 20:35], says the Apostle.<sup>26</sup>

Luther observes that the love of God in Christ is not like natural human love. Otherwise stated, God's love is not naturally oriented toward a person possessing goodness, but rather toward sinners and even evil persons. When God's love flows in and through humans, then, their love too is oriented toward people who are seen as bad, sinful, or needy. Being made a theologian of the cross through death and resurrection, humans image in their lives the type of divine love they have received in Christ. Luther calls such imaging "the love of the cross, born of the cross." Sinners are not loved by God because he finds some attractive qualities ("the true and good") in them. Instead, God creates the object of his love from scratch, and thus "sinners

are attractive because they are loved” anew by God in Christ. So also, God’s people do not love neighbors because they are attractive or beautiful, or because they have something they “may enjoy,” but rather confer on them God’s spiritual and material blessings to restore them as God’s good and beautiful creation amid the brokenness of creation. As Mannermaa puts it: “God gives Godself to . . . that which is bad or evil, and this is also the task of Christians in their relationship with their neighbors. This is why Luther calls Christians ‘Christ(s),’ and this is what Luther means with the expression of being ‘Christ to one’s neighbors.’”<sup>27</sup>

### ***What’s In It for Me?: Two Kinds of Love and the Immigrant Other***

In an essay subtitled “God’s Mercy for a Culture of Violence and Death,” Alberto L. García calls for the addition of a *sola caritate dei* (God’s love alone) to Lutheran Reformation language as a way to clarify and proclaim the witness of the gospel in a North American culture of increasing exclusion of and violence toward immigrants.<sup>28</sup> He sees such life-denying culture as resulting from an idolatrous view of the nation-state. When the nation-state is seen as a sacralized institution whose leaders can do no wrong, such uncritical attitude encourages an ethic of excluding people in society who are seen as potential enemies of the state or, more generally, the American way of life.<sup>29</sup> In the aftermath of 9/11 and in the current political climate, refugees (particularly from predominantly Muslim countries) and immigrants (particularly from Mexico and Central America), perhaps more than any other groups, are seen with suspicion as such potential enemies. When North Americans, including Christians, uncritically adopt a form of civil religion grounded in a sacralized absolute distinction between “us” (citizens) and “them” (migrants), they tend to make refugees and immigrants scapegoats for the ills of the nation; strip them of their dignity by reducing them to criminals; take advantage of their labors and bodies; and fail to reach out to them with the gospel and works of love.<sup>30</sup>

As a tool to unmask what García sees as the idolatry of civil religion and offer a gospel witness in the midst of its culture of exclusion and violence, he deploys thesis 28 of Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation’s contrast between the love of humans and the love of God in humans.<sup>31</sup> As a reminder, human love is driven, even if benignly so, by self-interest, and thus seeks that which it likes and is naturally attracted to; by contrast, the Christlike love of God in humans moves in the direction of what is not good or naturally attractive, but rather toward what is sinful, bad, poor, and generally unattractive from a human

*In the current political climate, refugees and immigrants perhaps more than any other groups, are seen with suspicion as potential enemies.*

perspective. In North America today, García observes that migrants are seen as the most unattractive of neighbors, and thus the objects of rhetoric that justifies their dehumanization. In this climate, he challenges the church to embody a radical love toward the excluded other, like the love of God in Christ which extends to sinners and needy persons. The church is called to live her faith through the love of God alone, which flows through humans to others, by embodying a life of *sola caritate dei* or *sola agape dei*, that is to say, by embodying a love that is unmerited and unconditional.<sup>32</sup>

García's argument raises an important question for Lutherans who hold to the *solas* (that is, *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*) as part of their confessional, pastoral, and missional Reformation identity. How does Luther's distinction between the two kinds of love help us to reflect on immigrants today, particularly on attitudes toward them, in a context where the love of affinity among people of a common nation is politicized in such a way that outsiders tend to be seen with suspicion and labeled as potential enemies, or to put it less negatively, in a way that outsiders are ultimately valued according to the benefits or lack thereof they bring to the host nation?

In a 2019 survey of 30,133 people in 27 countries, Pew found that people who tend to favor increasing ethnic, religious, and racial diversity—a factor significantly linked to increasing global migration in the past decade—“tend to be younger, have more education, and place themselves on the left end of the political spectrum,” whereas those who oppose increasing diversity tend to be “older adults” on “the right of the political spectrum.”<sup>33</sup> While the United States as a whole is much more open to increasing diversity than many countries in Western Europe, there is still a certain political split over support for such diversity with 70% of Democrats and independents and 54% of Republicans and Republican leaners in favor of it.<sup>34</sup> Analysis of an earlier survey of 18 nations found that people opposing diversity due to migration “were more likely to see immigrants as a burden on society,” as people who “take our jobs and social benefits,” or “more likely to say immigrants want to be distinct from their country's society.”<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Democrats (86%) tend to see openness to foreigners as “essential to who we are as a nation” and Republicans (57%) are more likely to warn that too much openness means “we risk losing our identity as a nation.”<sup>36</sup> Not surprisingly, all the aforementioned negative claims about immigrants have been challenged.<sup>37</sup> For our purposes, however, what is of interest is the way in which arguments in the United States for or against greater openness to the refugee and immigrant other are ultimately based on the same “what's in it for me” ethic.

If we consider ways refugees and immigrants are often portrayed in the national immigration debate, we note how they are frequently seen through the lens of what Luther would call a theology of glory grounded in natural human love. When Luther describes the concept of human love in the philosophers and theologians up to

that time, he explains that such love always has an ideal object one looks up to. For Luther, such human love finally “comes into being through what is pleasing to it” and “seeks its own good.” Humans naturally tend to love others “because they are attractive,” that is, because such people reflect attributes like those of the Creator humans also seek to realize in themselves. And that someone becomes attractive if and when that someone is of benefit to us.

When attractive attributes such as holiness, truth, justice, wisdom, beauty, goodness, and so on are judged to be lacking in migrants—particularly those who offend people the most, like the Muslim refugee or the undocumented immigrant—they are seen with suspicion and portrayed in the worst possible light. While it is true that undocumented immigrants have broken a law, and their status needs resolution before the law, there is often in the public discourse an emotionally charged and dehumanizing response against them. They are reduced to convenient one-size-fits-all categories such as “criminals,” “rapists,” and “bad hombres.” In some church circles, these immigrants are not only seen as sinners, but often as paragons of sin and thus the worst of sinners. Interestingly, in response to this approach, advocates of migrants ironically operate from the same framework when they argue for their acceptance on the basis of attractive qualities such as their work ethic, love of family, and spirituality. The discussion frequently turns to the need for the law to take into consideration the contributions immigrants, including the unauthorized, make to the economy, the community, and the church. Here conservatives and liberals, closed and open borders folks, become strange bedfellows. For both, loving or acceptance of migrants is ultimately conditional upon their capacity to reflect in their lives what is most attractive, pleasing, and beneficial to us.

In contrast to the human love taught by the philosophers and scholastics, Luther describes the love of the theologian of the cross as a love “which turns in the direction where it does not find good which it may enjoy, but where it may confer good upon the bad and needy person.” Such love does not seek an attractive and likeable object to love, but rather loves the unattractive and unlikeable. What if Christians learned to love the refugee and immigrant other with such Christlike love? Such love would surely “call a thing what it is,” acknowledge their sins, as with any sinner, without romanticizing them, denying them moral agency, or reducing them to victims. But such love would also acknowledge their humanity, needs, struggles, and hopes. Such a love would not merely point to that which is bad in people as an end in itself, but move toward thinking creatively about appropriate ways to bestow that which is good in them. Indeed, the love of the cross that moves Christians toward that which is not attractive may lead them to enter the world of the refugee and immigrant other more deeply, listen to these neighbors’ stories of migration, visit them in detention centers, pray for them and their families, accompany them to immigration court, assist with the payment of legal fees, advocate for them before elected government officials, or

partner with pro-bono immigration services and other social agencies to offer them legal counsel and humanitarian assistance.

### **Sola Hospitalitate Dei: The Limits of Facebook Love and the Continuity of Luther's Principle of Divine Love in His Career**

Written later in his life, Luther's teachings on Abraham's hospitality toward the three strangers at Mamre in the *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545) are consistent with thesis 28 of his earlier Heidelberg Disputation (1518). In their own way, both call for a cruciform love toward outsiders. In his commentary on Genesis 18, Luther argues that hospitality toward exiles rises to the level of an external mark of the church that flows from the gospel, so that the church becomes the house of Abraham in a world filled with people on the move.<sup>38</sup> Whether Luther discusses brotherly love toward Christians or general goodness toward other strangers, or whether he speaks of the responsibilities of the state toward their own residents in need vis-à-vis people in need coming from other lands, the same principle holds true, namely, the love of God in humans tends in the direction of the needy person. In particular, Luther is asking Christians, which in his day would have included church authorities but also godly princes acting in their calling as government authorities, to act toward strangers persecuted on account of the word ("true strangers") or fleeing their lands for other reasons ("strangers of the state") in a way that they would do their best to bestow good upon the needy person. Hospitality toward strangers does not seem to operate ultimately on the principle of human love, such as the love people of a state share for one another (though this is not excluded), but rather on the principle of God's love in humans whereby sinful, bad, and needy persons are made attractive because they are loved.

In the context of Christendom in his day, Luther could appeal to a Christian prince's morality and even praise the kind of Christlike hospitality and mercy flowing through him in his compassion to exiles. In the case of a godly prince, Luther would have seen such hospitality as an instance of a calling through which not merely human love but the love of God in his civil servant bestows good upon the needy. The situation today is somewhat different. In post-Christendom, we may or may not be able to appeal to a prince's morality, and perhaps even less a ruler's Christian ethos. Public discourse on refugees and immigrants will do no better than the human love of the philosophers, and various sectors of society will debate public policies on immigration on the basis of the perceived liabilities or benefits of refugees and immigrants to the nation. Decisions on their status will be made on whether they have desirable and pleasant qualities that we share in common or not. That is as far as human love discourses can take us, and that might be good enough for getting along in a society with competing views of the good.

Indeed, there is a place in immigration debates for arguments based on the love of affinity, particularly the common bond citizens and residents of a nation have

*Pointing to the bad  
without bestowing the  
good bears all the marks  
of a theologian of glory.*

together. Yet this type of love does not have to be seen as mutually exclusive to hospitable love. Solidarity with the stranger other does not exclude hard thinking about complex issues that aim at consensus or compromise in a divided society—compromise that is often based on a utilitarian ethic.<sup>39</sup> For instance, in

his book *Toward a Theory of Immigration*, Lutheran political theorist Peter Meilaender argues that in the context of modern nation-states' rights to regulate their borders, public policy must understandably give priority to the needs of their fellow citizens and their visions of what constitutes community.<sup>40</sup> But even though the author takes as his point of departure a preferential option for fellow citizens, he also notes two "exceptions" that can justify placing limits on the nation-state's priority to look out for the needs of those within its borders, namely, the situation of desperate refugees and keeping families together (family unification).<sup>41</sup> Arguments based on human love toward fellow citizens and residents are taken seriously, but do not forbid making room for arguments based on an ethic of hospitality that also takes proper account of the plight of foreigners.

To state the matter in theological terms, Luther accounts for human love in affirming the responsibility of nations to take care of their own citizens, but at the same time calls Christians to a certain higher standard when dealing with exiles—a more radical love and hospitality than the one available to the philosophers and theologians of his day. Thus Luther can acknowledge the priority the state should give to its "needy citizens . . . ahead of the others,"<sup>42</sup> and also praise his head of state for extending hospitality and protection to "miserable exiles, who flee for refuge."<sup>43</sup> The natural human love of countrymen and women remains, but does not exclude outrightly the love of the stranger other.<sup>44</sup> Even though Christians will need to engage like-minded people in society to reach consensus or compromise on various civil matters, Christians cannot simply stop with human love when they think about unpopular or unlikable neighbors. When they appeal to human love as an end in itself, then, they become theologians of glory. They only begin to love those whom they see as reflecting the glory of God (in a creaturely way) in their lives, and disregard those whom they see as lacking such divine-like qualities. To avoid a utilitarian approach to neighbors that ends with human love, Christians must therefore also ask how they can embody both as citizens of heaven and citizens of the nation the cruciform love and hospitality of God through their callings toward neighbors who are considered bad, sinful, and needy. This, of course, includes all kinds of people, both citizens and residents of the state, as well as other foreign nationals living in our midst.

Sadly, Christians and Lutherans have too often stopped at human love when it comes to refugees and immigrants, especially those who offend them the most. Lutherans have done so when they point to or name their sinful or bad acts, or their lack of attractive or beneficial qualities, but are unwilling to bestow any good upon the needy neighbor. Pointing to the bad and bestowing the good is what a theologian of the cross does, but pointing to the bad without bestowing the good bears all the marks of a theologian of glory. This requires a different way of thinking than the one available to natural human reason. In his commentary on Genesis 18, Luther reminds us that when we look at strangers through the “eyes of the flesh,” their “bodily appearance is a hindrance to us,” but when we look at them with the “inner eyes of faith” we see that “God is coming” to us in his saints.<sup>45</sup> Here Luther has in mind fellow Christians with whom we share the common bond of fellowship in Christ, but he also extends such hospitality to other strangers who are not among the “saints” but nevertheless require our general kindness.<sup>46</sup>

What if we were to look at all strangers, especially those who offend us the most, through the eyes of Abraham (the language of the *Lectures on Genesis*), or through the eyes of the love of the cross (the language of the Heidelberg Disputation)? Embodying such hospitality is a high call, quite a difficult one to practice today, at a time when public and even Christian discourse on refugees and immigrants is highly politicized, tribal, and divisive. Even in his own day, Luther complained about hospitality toward exiles—including Christians themselves!—being a rare thing to see among Christians.<sup>47</sup> Not much has changed, since human nature in and of itself operates on the basis of the love of affinity.

At a time when a disposition toward hospitality toward those who are unlike us is in short demand, I wonder if it is time for yet another Reformation *sola* in our day. Inspired by Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, García proposes *sola agape dei*, “God’s love alone.” I pitch my tent with him, but would also like to communicate another dimension of “the love of God in humans” (*amor dei in homines*<sup>48</sup>) in thesis 28 of the Disputation by using the language of the *Lectures on Genesis*, chapter 18. What about another *sola* that highlights hospitality as a mark of the church we are in dire need of today? Such hospitality is the fruit of God’s grace alone (*sola gratia*), received by faith alone (*sola fide*), as it is spoken to us in Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*). Such hospitality norms our lives in the world, but has its origin in God’s own love for us in Christ, and thus in God’s own hospitality toward sinful, bad, and needy persons like us. What about a *sola hospitalitate dei*, “God’s hospitality alone,” as another way to clarify what the love of God in humans—the *sola agape dei* (that is, the divine love alone) of the Heidelberg Disputation—might look like at a time such as this when we have the largest number of people on the move in human history? *Sola hospitalitate dei*. When we embody God’s hospitality alone, like does not merely find like it may enjoy but creates a space to welcome the unlikely and unlikeable other into God’s life and ours. We move from Facebook love to Christlike love.

## ***Commonality and Solidarity: Lessons on Theological Nuance for Lutherans Living in Politically Divisive Times***

We began this essay with Jacobs's description of our current cultural situation, one in which political tribalism gets in the way of nuanced thinking that aims at building consensus (or at least civil compromise) across opposite sides of the political spectrum. We noted that national opinions and attitudes toward refugees and immigrants do not merely illustrate such divisiveness, but also tend to reduce these neighbors to one-sided categories advanced by opposing bands. They are either romanticized as victims without moral agency, or perhaps more often than not, demonized and dehumanized as societal burdens. Is there a way to heed Jacobs's call to move beyond such simplistic thinking toward a more balanced approach that moves beyond one-sided views of immigration reform and the immigrant other? Jacobs offers some basic ways of engaging in civil discourse with those whom we disagree, including the following: "Value learning over debating. . . . As best you can, online and off, avoid people who fan flames. . . . Gravitate, as best you can . . . toward people who seem to value genuine community and can handle disagreement with equanimity. . . . Seek out the best and fairest-minded of people whose views you disagree with. . . . Try to describe others' positions in the language that *they* use."<sup>49</sup> But how might engaging the other with such civility and open-mindedness also account for the complexity of the neighbors their arguments refer to? Do we have any good examples of such a nuanced approach?

In a separate essay, I have argued that even when Lutherans disagree significantly on the starting point for approaching questions concerning immigration, they still yield remarkably similar fruit in the careful attention they give to the situation of strangers, including both refugees and the undocumented, in their proposals for comprehensive US immigration law and reform.<sup>50</sup> For instance, in their book *They Are Us*, Stephen Bouman and Ralston Deffenbaugh enter the immigration debate with a commitment to hospitality toward strangers as a fundamental and guiding biblical value, which in turn leads them to take as their point of departure a preferential option for the stranger in their assessment of immigration laws.<sup>51</sup> In other words, we may say that their preferential option for immigrants on the basis of divine love does not get in the way of their dealing with the need to think about the laws of the land in the order of the love of affinity. The authors conclude that the immigration system is broken in three ways, namely, the backlog in visa applications keeps families apart, a number of visas for unskilled workers do not meet labor demand and this leads to unfair labor practices, and prison-like detention centers for low-risk immigrants (including children) is an unnecessary and harsh form of punishment.<sup>52</sup> The priority of solidarity with the stranger does not evade thinking about questions concerning immigration law and reform. The authors' concern for making laws better may be seen as a way of showing their respect for the very rule of

law such laws seek to uphold (and thus their respect for fellow citizens), and at the same time their respect for the immigrant other.

On the other hand, Peter Meilaender deploys the concept of “special relationships” to support a preferential option for fellow citizens and residents of the nation in immigration laws.<sup>53</sup> But despite beginning with a preferential option for fellow citizens of the nation on the basis of the love of affinity, Meilaender also proposes, for instance, that undocumented immigrants “who have lived in this country for an extended period, starting families and putting down roots, at some point can no longer reasonably be regarded as outsiders. *De facto*, if not *de jure*, they are one of us.”<sup>54</sup> So Meilaender ends up, at least in the case of some undocumented immigrants, in the same place where Bouman and Deffenbaugh started, namely, with the assertion that at least in some significant cases, *They Are Us!* Otherwise stated, love based on commonality does not exclude a complementary ethic of solidarity with the immigrant other.

While Bouman, Deffenbaugh, and Meilaender reflect on immigration issues from different starting points, one from a preferential option for the stranger and another from a preferential option for citizens and other residents in close proximity to us, they both have ways of accounting for hospitality and law in their arguments. Their positions are not ultimately one-sided, but nuanced. Nor do they romanticize or demonize immigrants. Despite the different and even contrasting rhetorical entry points into the moral dilemma of immigration by these Lutheran authors, it is remarkable—especially in our politically divided and divisive culture—that both take into serious consideration what I would call Luther’s concern for Christians to embody a Christlike way of loving the poor and needy, bad and unattractive neighbors, that does not merely point out the bad but is willing to bestow the good upon them. They give us an example of the way forward Jacobs hopes for, one in which Christians do not merely mirror the culture’s way of doing things. They embody a better way, one in which Lutherans move beyond Facebook love or mere human love, to the love of the cross the Spirit of Christ works in us, that is, the love of God revealed in the Face of Jesus Christ.

## Endnotes

- 1 Alan Jacobs, *How To Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds* (New York: Currency, 2017), 27. He borrows the term “culturally repugnant other” from an essay written by cultural anthropologist Susan Friend Harding.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., 27–28.
- 4 “Republicans turn more negative toward refugees as number admitted to U.S. plummets,” 24 May, 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/24/republicans-turn-more-negative-toward-refugees-as-number-admitted-to-u-s-plummets/>
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid. However, a more recent 2019 Pew survey shows that a majority of Republicans (58%) now state that refugee admissions from violent countries is an important policy goal. See “Americans’ immigration policy priorities: Divisions between—and within—the two parties.” 12 November, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/12/americans-immigration-policy-priorities-divisions-between-and-within-the-two-parties/>
- 7 “Americans’ immigration policy priorities: Divisions between—and within—the two parties.”
- 8 “Why would people ever think, when thinking deprives them of ‘the pleasure or sharing an attitude one knows is socially approved’—especially in an online environment where the social approval of one’s attitudes is so much easier to acquire, in the currency of likes, faves, followers, and friends?” Jacobs, *How To Think*, 21; on social media as a contemporary means in the human search for justification, see A. Trevor Sutton, “Inclined to Boast: Social Media and Self-Justification,” *Concordia Journal* 45, no. 1 (2019): 33–44.
- 9 I am using the term *theologian* broadly to refer to all Christians, since they are called to speak about, for, and to God, as well as to love in God’s name.
- 10 Tuomo Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love: Martin Luther’s Religious World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 9. See Luther’s Works [hereafter LW] 31:57.
- 11 LW 31:41.
- 12 LW 31:57–58.
- 13 Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love*, 2.
- 14 Ibid., 10–11.
- 15 Ibid., 16.
- 16 Ibid., 19.
- 17 Ibid., 19.
- 18 LW 31:52.
- 19 LW 31:52.
- 20 Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation*, 1518 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 3–4.
- 21 Ibid., 1.
- 22 Ibid., 4.
- 23 Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love*, 28.
- 24 “Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins” (thesis 3). LW 31:39; “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil” (thesis 21). LW 31:40.
- 25 “Although the works of God always seem unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits” (thesis 4). LW 31:39. In his explanation of thesis 21, Luther notes that “the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and [human] works are evil, for through the cross works are destroyed and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified.” LW 31:53.
- 26 LW 31:57; for a similar contemporary contrast between two kinds of love, see C. S. Lewis’s distinction between Divine Gift-Love in humans and natural Gift-love: “But Divine Gift-Love—Love Himself working in a man—is wholly disinterested and desires what is simply best for the beloved. Again, natural

- Gift-love is always directed to objects which the lover finds in some way intrinsically lovable—objects to which Affection or Eros or a shared point of view attracts him, or, failing that, to the grateful and the deserving, or perhaps to those whose helplessness is of a winning and appealing kind. But Divine Gift-Love in the man enables him to love what is not naturally lovable; lepers, criminals, enemies, morons, the sulky, the superior and the sneering.” C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Bruce & World, 1960), 177.
- 27 Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love*, 64–65.
- 28 Alberto L. García and John A. Nunes, *Wittenberg Meets the World: Reimagining the Reformation at the Margins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 59–62; for a discussion of the good, the bad, and the ugly in a person’s love of country or patriotism, see C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 39–49.
- 29 García and Nunes, *Wittenberg Meets the World*, 56–57.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 57–58.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 61–62.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 33 “A Changing World: Global Views on Diversity, Gender Equality, Family Life, and the Importance of Religion,” 22 April, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/04/22/a-changing-world-global-views-on-diversity-gender-equality-family-life-and-the-importance-of-religion/>
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 “People around the world express support for taking in refugees more than immigrants,” 9 August 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/09/people-around-the-world-express-more-support-for-taking-in-refugees-than-immigrants/>
- 36 “Growing share of Republicans say U.S. risks losing its identity if it is too open to foreigners,” 17 July 20, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/17/growing-share-of-republicans-say-u-s-risks-losing-its-identity-if-it-is-too-open-to-foreigners/>
- 37 For example, Nowrasteh argues that “policy debate too often focuses on visible costs rather than the larger but less visible benefits. When it comes to trade, the impact of cheaper imports on older industries in the Midwest attracts disproportionate attention relative to the much larger benefits to other economic sectors, consumers, and regions of the country. When it comes to guns, the statistically rare mass shooting gets more attention rather than the far larger number of crimes prevented by Americans with firearms. When it comes to immigration, concerns about wage competition, crime, terrorism, and cultural assimilation dominate the debate while the enormous benefits are largely ignored.” Alex Nowrasteh, “Myths and Facts of Immigration Policy,” 4 March 2019. <https://www.cato.org/policy-report/januaryfebruary-2019/myths-facts-immigration-policy>.
- 38 For an in-depth treatment of Luther’s reflections on Abraham’s hospitality, see Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., “The Church is the House of Abraham: Reflections on Martin Luther’s Teaching on Hospitality toward Exiles,” *Concordia Journal* 44, no. 1 (2018): 23–39.
- 39 Jacobs argues that, whereas a generous “solidarity” toward neighbors who are “unlike you” at times may trump “critical reflection,” there is also a “public policy” space in which “solidarity is not enough” but “must be supplemented by a colder-eyed look at what particular strategies and tactics are most likely to realize the desired end” on issues that concern people with competing views of the common good. *How To Think*, 68–69.
- 40 Peter Meilaender, *Toward a Theory of Immigration* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).
- 41 *Ibid.*, 174–183.
- 42 *LW* 7:338.
- 43 *LW* 3:181–182.
- 44 Using the analogy of the incarnation, C. S. Lewis speaks of natural human love (such as love of friends or country) in such a way that “Charity does not dwindle into merely natural love but natural love is taken up into, made the tuned and obedient instrument of, Love Himself.” *The Four Loves*, 184. Turning natural love into charitable love includes attitudes or dispositions toward the unlovable such as “forbearance, tolerance, forgiveness” (186).

- 45 LW 3:196
- 46 For instance, Luther points out that if a “Turk or Tartar” (in today’s language, a Muslim) came to us as a “stranger” and “in distress,” we should not disregard him “even though he is not suffering because of the Word.” LW 3:183–184.
- 47 LW 3:196.
- 48 WA 1:365.9.
- 49 Jacobs, *How To Think*, 155–156.
- 50 Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., “Bearing So Much Similar Fruit: Lutheran Theology and Comprehensive Immigration Reform,” in Ronald W. Duty and Marie A. Failing, eds. *Secular Governance: Lutheran Perspectives on Contemporary Legal Issues* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 184–205.
- 51 Stephen Bouman and Ralston Deffenbaugh, *They Are Us: Lutherans and Immigration* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).
- 52 *Ibid.*, 59–69.
- 53 “The world, after all, contains countless needy people who require assistance. How are we to know whom to help? So we begin with those to whom we stand in special relationships. . . . Immigration regulations are a way of embodying in policy a preferential love for our own fellow citizens and the way of life that we share. Such a preference can be overridden, but it is not inherently suspect.” Peter C. Meilaender, “Immigration: Citizens and Strangers,” *First Things* 173 (May 2007): 11.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 12.



# Darkness Long in Coming Christians and the Language of Politics in the Dark

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Christians pray “Thy kingdom come” to their Father in heaven with joy and confidence. God has promised his gracious rule and reign to them. So they pray knowing nothing and no one will prevent God. But until he fulfills his word, they lead their lives where the kingdom of God in the very best

of circumstances is foreshadowed unevenly.

Whatever the circumstances, Christians in the present age have responsibilities for their neighbors. These include matters of politics. But Christians in the United States today may find it hard even to recognize clearly their political responsibilities. Reasons vary, but being members of a large, complex, and conflicted modern democracy is among the most important. There are so many people, so much going on, so much unsettled.

It is the unsettled aspect of political life that confuses and troubles the most. I want to pursue this feature of American politics and offer a few reflections for Christians and their political lives.

## **Politics as a Political Dilemma**

*Politics* is the usual word for who and what and how and why a community or a society decides and does things. The United States will be holding elections in 2020, and questions about *who* abound. Who are the candidates? Who gets to vote? Will there be voter fraud or voter suppression? Will social media have a negative influence on voters? These are questions about who in a society decides things. These are

questions of politics. We can repeat this exercise with the other aspects of politics—*what* and *how* and *why*—pertaining to matters of government, and also about topics like abortion and events like pro-life marches.

Accordingly, topics, persons, actions, and events become *political* or *are politicized* when they become important for their perceived causes or effects on politics or when they come to stand for a particular view on politics. The COVID-19 outbreak has become political in both ways. For example, wearing a mask stands for being concerned about public health and safety. Not wearing a mask stands for individual liberty. Masks have become a *political* matter. People advance these claims to make others think and take action because of the *political* ramifications of the disease. They *politicize* the outbreak.

The symbolism of masks reflects how almost anything can become political. This is one reason many Americans think politics is in a bad way. Another reason is that Americans are increasingly polarized. They don't just disagree. They aren't just divided. They also tend to bunch together around a set of positions. If you are against abortion rights, then you would be expected to worry about the loss of religious freedom, be skeptical about what scientists say about climate change, and want no part of defunding the police. If you support Black Lives Matter, then it would be unsurprising to find you think the police favor the interests, property, and lives of white Americans, that you are against building a wall on the southern border, and that you want our laws and institutions to secure actual opportunities for everyone, especially racial minorities and the poor, to receive a solid education, to get a job with real long-term prospects, to live in decent and affordable housing, and to have the equal protection of laws. There are *exceptions*, but they are exceptions. Polarization is the norm. Along with being polarized, politics is increasingly antagonistic. Politics requires cooperation and compromise. Antagonism makes cooperation difficult and compromise unseemly. Antagonism born of polarization and partisanship threatens politics itself.

Drawing together these features of our situation today, we can see that politics itself has become a political dilemma. The major political challenge today is politics. To be sure, this has happened before in the United States. Ten years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Shays' Rebellion was the catalyst for a new Constitution; seventy years after the US Constitution was written, a civil war and the end of slavery; a hundred years after the Civil War, the demand for civil rights finally led to the Civil Rights Act. In each case, politics itself was a political dilemma. Each case required not a repair for politics but a new way of seeing in politics. It is the same way with the contemporary problems of our politics.

### ***Politics in the Dark***

Thinking we need a new way of seeing, not merely a patch or a repair, suggests that

a guiding metaphor would help us. *Seeing* is itself metaphorical, and it implies a metaphor for our situation: *dark*.

Others have already taken hold of it. In *After Virtue*, his influential book on moral discourse in contemporary Western societies, Alasdair MacIntyre called on readers to prepare for “the coming ages of barbarism and darkness.”<sup>1</sup> As sober as that was, he was only filling out in prose what Matthew Arnold had put into verse more than a century before:

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night. (“Dover Beach” 1867)

MacIntyre thought the darkness was coming. Arnold thought it had already come. Nietzsche, in his famous passage on the madman, had it both ways: it was dark in the daylight. A madman runs into a marketplace in the bright morning carrying a lit lantern, looking for God. Bystanders mock him: Where is God? The madman tells them:

“Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.”<sup>2</sup>

But those gathered around the madman could not see the darkness nor understand what he was saying. It was as if the darkness had not caught up with events.<sup>3</sup> For Nietzsche, the darkness would be long in coming.

As a metaphor, *dark* is capable of several uses. We will follow the notion

*The problem is that we often don't know that we don't know what we're talking about.*

Rebecca Solnit distinguished from an observation made by Virginia Woolf: “On January 18, 1915, six months into the First World War, as all Europe was convulsed by killing and dying, Virginia Woolf wrote in her journal, ‘The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be,

I think.’ Dark, she seems to say, as in inscrutable, not as in terrible. We often mistake the one for the other.”<sup>4</sup> Dark, as in inscrutable, not as in terrible, is a fitting way to describe not only the future of the United States today but also the nation’s politics. The need for a new way of seeing implies that our current ways do not work. We are left, to follow the metaphor, in the dark.

What do we do with this metaphor? How do we address the problem of “politics in the dark”? Stanley Hauerwas has an apt recommendation: “Morally speaking, the first issue is never what we are to do, but what we should see. Here is the way it works: you can act only in the world that you can see, and you must be taught to see by learning to say.”<sup>5</sup> He said this with respect to Christians dealing with the problem of abortion, and a couple of specific examples from his discussion make his general point concrete. With abortion, you need to learn to say “abortion,” not “termination of pregnancy,” but you also need to learn to stop saying, “life is sacred.” The injunction astonishes many Christians, but Hauerwas has a telling response. The notion that life is sacred, by which he means that life is an ultimate and absolute good, is itself not Christian. As he explains:

As a matter of fact, Christians do not believe that life is sacred. I often remind my right-to-life friends that Christians took their children with them to martyrdom rather than have them raised pagan. Christians believe there is much worth dying for. We do not believe that human life is an absolute good in and of itself. Of course, our desire to protect human life is part of our seeing each human being as God’s creature. But that does not mean that we believe that life is an overriding good. To say that life is an overriding good is to underwrite the modern sentimentality that there is absolutely nothing in this world worth dying for.<sup>6</sup>

And then Hauerwas lets us see what happens when we speak in this way: all of us turn into legalists:

When you frame the abortion issue in sacredness-of-life language, you get into intractable debates about when life begins. Notice that this is an issue for legalists. By that I mean the fundamental question becomes, How do you avoid doing the wrong thing.

In contrast, the Christian approach is not one of deciding when life has begun, but hoping that it has. We hope that human life has begun! We are not the kind of people that ask: Does human life start at the blastocyst stage, or at implantation? Instead, we are the kind of people that hope life has started, because we are ready to believe that this new life will enrich our community.<sup>7</sup>

*Being taught to see by learning to say* applies to any topic or situation. It certainly applies to anything else politically important. No one would disagree with this general assertion. The problem is that we often don't know that we don't know what we're talking about. An additional problem is that we usually try to justify ourselves when our ways of talking are questioned or criticized. Hauerwas addressed both problems. He dealt with the problem of not knowing what we're talking about by challenging the saying "life is sacred." He dealt with the problem of trying to justify ourselves with a ready response.

Abortion is indeed a terrible problem, but it might be too familiar to make the point. Here is an example from the political conversation going on as I write: "Defund the police." Many respond practically: "This will invite more violence and crime." Some respond with the opposite: "More funding for the police." A few respond theologically: "This call for defunding goes against the ordinance and institution of God, as the Apostles teach," referring to Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2. Those who respond do not see that some calls for defunding the police are at root calls for the police and justice system to act justly. Following Hauerwas, it is important first to be taught to see by learning to say.

One way to do this is by asking: What are the police for? Answers vary, but one that makes good sense of calls to defund the police is: "The police perpetuate racial injustice." This had been said for a long time. Here is one version from the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1967: "For many ghetto residents, the symbol of white authority is the policeman, who, in their view, has often not provided protection for citizens within the ghetto, does not treat them with dignity and respect and views his role as that of keeping Negroes 'in line' on behalf of the white community."<sup>8</sup> The answer was given recently, reflecting on the police after the killing of George Floyd:

In his influential work on prisons, the philosopher and historian Michel Foucault pointed out the following: We say that the prisons fail at their task, yet we keep them going. Perhaps we should be asking not why the prison fails but instead what it actually succeeds at.

That is the question we should be asking of the police. Not why do they regularly fail to perform their duties correctly and thus need reform, but rather, what duties are they succeeding at?

Once we ask that question, the answer is entirely clear. They succeed in keeping people in their place. They succeed in keeping middle-class and especially upper-class white people safe, so long as they don't get out of line. They succeed in keeping people of color in their place so that they don't challenge the social order that privileges middle- and upper-class white people. And, as we have recently witnessed in many violent police responses at protests, they succeed in suppressing those who would question the social order.<sup>9</sup>

From this standpoint, here is what we see: policing in the United States is a problem of justice itself. If policing is itself unjust, then nothing short of rethinking public safety, law enforcement, and criminal justice is in order. This is why we should listen to calls to “defund the police.” This does not mean taking it either as an ultimatum or as revelation, but as a call for discussion, discernment, and debate about how to attain both racial justice and public safety for all. It is an example of the opportunity to learn to say and then learn to see so that we may decide and do wisely.

Pulling back to the wider discussion, ignorance about ignorance is a problem you can't address by yourself. If you need to learn to see and learn to say, then you have to depend on others to teach you. You have to listen in humility and openness. Without them it is impossible to seek what is true and right.

So, there is an even more basic political requirement than learning to say. It is being the right kind of person: humble and open. This is the person who will learn to say, then learn to see. The requirement is straightforward but not easy. The enemy of humility is pride; the obstacle to openness is fear. Pride leads us to assume, “There is my way and the wrong way.” Fear of being wrong makes pride a matter of self-defense. It is a vicious cycle. Someone else has to break it. It is a politically important fact to know that other religions and philosophies have their ways to deal with pride and fear, but not as important as knowing and believing that our God overcomes pride and fear and all of their consequences in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ breaks the vicious cycle of pride and fear by turning us from ourselves to faith in him and faithfulness to him. We no longer need to depend on ourselves and defend ourselves. So, at least for Christians themselves, the basic political requirements are faith and faithfulness. They make our engagement possible especially when politics is complex, confused, and conflicted. In today's situation, claiming a political position or action as “Christian” is divisive. Being a Christian, however, who lives by faith in the God who made all things and in the Lord through whom there is everlasting life, is indispensable when Christians engage in politics in any situation, and especially when politics is in the dark.

### ***The Language of Politics in the Dark***

The discussion so far applies for specific questions and problems like abortion and racial

justice. This matters when there is so much disagreement and division. But we still have to deal with politics itself as a dilemma.

Here, too, language is a key. All politics has language as a basic ingredient. Language matters when someone concerned with climate change encourages friends and neighbors to recycle, use a push reel lawn mower, and eat less meat. Language also matters at the highest levels of government for making laws, establishing policies, and formulating plans. Politics always requires speaking and listening, reading and writing, proposing and protesting and promising. Sometimes politics also includes name-calling, lies, and threats.

Of all the English language writers of the past hundred years, there is one whose name has been turned into a widely used adjective: George Orwell. Why? Because he showed how much language matters to politics and that someone could gain political control by controlling language. He did this most vividly and memorably in *1984*. But his 1945 essay “Politics and the English Language” does better in orienting us.

Orwell pointed out that politics and language mutually condition each other. When language is in a bad way, we can trace the decline back to political and economic causes, and not simply to the influence of some writer. But our language in turn can affect how we think and therefore what we do. Decline in language also has corresponding social effects, including the debasement of politics. However, the fact that one influences the other implies influence could work both ways: *improving* language could improve politics. As he explained:

The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.<sup>10</sup>

The general principle is clear and sensible. But how do we put this principle into effect for our particular situation? About his time Orwell said, “Political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible.”<sup>11</sup> This shows two things. First, Orwell focused on the language of political leaders and political observers in the press and the academy. Second, he cared especially about language used to obscure or mislead. In our time, both features still matter, but our concerns are broader. First, we should focus on the language of the whole people. American political leaders depend on the approval from voters and donors, and so how they speak and think about politics matters a great deal. Second, language in American politics does more than

*The language of politics  
is regularly used to  
divide and to demean.*

obscure or mislead, although this remains a huge difficulty. The language of politics is regularly used to divide and to demean. So it is worth asking more about our situation.

For this, we return to Nietzsche and his madman. According to the madman, darkness was coming because “God is dead.” This is why he was carrying a lantern in the daylight. But what kind of darkness does “God is dead” entail? We need to unpack the expression.

“God is dead” meant, as Nietzsche put it elsewhere, “that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable.”<sup>12</sup> “God is dead” was not a wish of Nietzsche’s, as some want to believe. It was his diagnosis of the situation then unfolding throughout Europe. People still believed in God, worshiped him, prayed to him. But who he was and how he mattered was no longer as the Scriptures testified and as so many generations had confessed in word and deed. This God had become unbelievable. And things would never be the same.<sup>13</sup>

Nietzsche was by no means the first in this diagnosis. Others had even referred to God’s *death*. But Nietzsche most thoroughly discerned the consequences. One consequence would be that Western societies would experience a massive shift. Nietzsche called it “the greatest change.”<sup>14</sup> The people of old experienced, decided, and hoped for everything in light of God. Once God was gone, no one and nothing would take his place to ground culture. There would be no acknowledged reference point for right and wrong, no certainty to serve as an Archimedean point for knowing what is true and good.<sup>15</sup> Philosophers and theologians had tried to fill the void, but from his late-nineteenth-century standpoint, Nietzsche recognized how they had failed and also why they *had* to fail.<sup>16</sup> Their failure meant a radical social upheaval.

A few even had both foreseen this shift and predicted the further social consequence. The most well-known was Dostoyevsky, who had written, “Without God, everything is permitted.” He imagined that moral relativism and unbridled wantonness would follow. Nietzsche was another. He imagined a different and even more difficult result: moral strictness once the darkness settled in. As Albert Camus explained:

A profounder logic replaces the “if nothing is true, everything is permitted” of Karamazov by “if nothing is true, nothing is permitted.” To deny that one single thing is forbidden in this world amounts to renouncing everything that is permitted. At the point where it is no longer possible to say what is black and what is white, the light is extinguished and freedom becomes a voluntary prison.<sup>17</sup>

Nietzsche was not contradicting a position like Dostoyevsky’s. He assumed that people would seek to do as they pleased once constraints had loosened and standards had eroded. But Nietzsche didn’t stop there. He proceeded to ask about the response. Would others stand for it? Would others permit someone to act on their freedom? Logically they would not have to. Likely they would not. Once someone challenged

one particular matter, then any matter could be challenged. If someone could challenge, then someone else could challenge the challenge.

The political implications are easy to discern, especially since they actually have been realized in our politics. The death of God means that the standards for judging and the constraints on our lives would disappear like landmarks becoming invisible as the night falls. The darkness, however, would not free everyone to do as they pleased, because the darkness also would mean that anything could be challenged and contested. Moreover, there would be nothing to keep the problem isolated or local. If enough people took sides, anything could become political. Furthermore, it made sense, once God is dead, to care especially what others thought. “The greatest change” that the death of God was working included the effect of doing and being in the wrong. The people of old “feared divine retribution and not merely a civil punishment and dishonor.”<sup>18</sup> But the death of God came about in large part because the most important thing about God became, “God is love,” and God himself was pushed into a supporting role in life. After that, only the punishment and esteem of others would really matter. Because people took sides already, politics would be polarized and antagonistic.

This kind of darkness also explains the language of politics. Without standards and constraints, truth, honesty, fairness, and even meaning become secondary to success, or at least survival. Lies, deceptions, one-sidedness, and empty slogans and platitudes are not just accepted; they are expected and even embraced. They have become habits.

Orwell reflected the modern political predicament in a single sentence: “All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia.”<sup>19</sup>

Nietzsche would have been unsurprised, even if thinking with him is still difficult for most people. Agreeing with Nietzsche, however, is unimportant. What matters is that almost everybody goes along in playing by the rules of the game that he imagined would emerge. Whether most can admit it even to themselves is doubtful. Nevertheless, they not only accept that God is dead, but they also go along with politics in the darkness that his death has brought upon the nations of the world.

### ***Christians and the Language of Politics in the Dark***

So, what are some of the bad habits in language that our political situation would call upon us to replace with better ones? How might Christians go about doing this? To understand the answers we should agree on an understanding of habits.

Some habits are personal. You eat the same breakfast every morning; your spouse doesn't even eat breakfast regularly. You make sure your breakfast food is on the shopping list well before it runs out; your spouse is amused that you keep track of that but not your supply of clean socks. You don't think about whether to have breakfast and what it should be; neither does your spouse. But both of you do the same thing

for different reasons: you are in the habit of eating the same breakfast every morning, but your spouse has no such habit. Some habits are personal.

Other habits are communal. You pick them up because of other people, and for the sake of other people. As a teacher of Lutheran theology, I notice these habits especially when they are *bad*. For example, I will ask whether the Lutheran Small Catechism, which all our students are supposed to know well, teaches that it is baptism that gives faith. A fair number will answer “Yes.” But the Catechism teaches that the gifts of baptism are forgiveness, life, and salvation. It does not teach that baptism gives faith, nor would it make any sense to teach this, because it is these gifts that “awaken and strengthen faith” (AC 13).<sup>20</sup> So why do they give this answer, if it is false and if it makes no theological sense? Habit. And they acquired this habit by going to church and hearing the preacher and others say that baptism automatically gives faith. They got into the habit by being with other Christians and for fitting in with them. Some habits are communal, including bad habits.

The habits of language in politics are communal, but they are not restricted to the politics of the entire society. If a particular group within the society were to learn some new and better habits of language, it might affect the entire society, including its politics. Here are three suggestions for Christians in the United States for habits that will help them recognize and fulfill their political responsibilities.

One bad habit of language in politics is using *meaningless words*. Orwell spoke about this habit in “Politics and the English Language.”

In certain kinds of writing, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism, it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning. Words like *romantic, plastic, values, human, dead, sentimental, natural, vitality*, as used in art criticism, are strictly meaningless in the sense that they not only do not point to any discoverable object, but are hardly even expected to do so by the reader. . . . Many political words are similarly abused. The word Fascism has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies “something not desirable.” The words *democracy, socialism, freedom, patriotic, realistic, justice*, have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another.<sup>21</sup>

Both the problem and the examples are still relevant. Meaningless words tend to foreclose discussion and debate, because they serve as markers of your partisanship, not as means to convey ideas.

For both politics and religion, meaningless words are especially a problem when they belong to what Richard Rorty called one’s “final vocabulary.” These are the words we use to define, explain, and justify ourselves and our lives. With them “we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term

projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives.” In American politics, calling something “democratic” is normally a formula of praise, “Fascist” an expression of contempt, and “evangelical” seems to work both ways, depending on the user. These words are “final” in the sense that they “are as far as [we] can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force.”<sup>22</sup> In American politics, helpless passivity shows in resignation; a resort to force in riots and riot police, but also in acquiring and carrying guns, which is particularly clear when carried in demonstrations.

Language always has limits, but Christians will do better as Christians, just as Americans will do better in their politics, if they use words chosen for their meaning. As Orwell put it: “What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about.”<sup>23</sup> It is important, however, also to know what it is for a word to have meaning. It is not enough to know the definition from a dictionary; you must also be able to show how to use the word. Karl Popper noted that definitions in science “must be read back to front, or from the right to the left,” and that this way of understanding and using definitions is just as important in politics.<sup>24</sup> After introducing my topic, I first offered a definition of politics. Working “from the left to the right” it said: *Politics* is the usual word for who and what and how and why a community or a society decides and does things.

But then I worked “from the right to the left,” that is, from some concrete example, then to the definition, and then to the word itself: The United States will be holding elections in 2020, and questions about *who* abound. Who are the candidates? Who gets to vote? Will there be voter fraud or voter suppression? Will social media have a negative influence on voters? These are questions about who in a society decides things. These are questions of politics.

Working this way with words is also vital for Christian terms. Take, for example, *sin* in the Augsburg Confession. Sin includes lack of trust and love of God. Working from the left to the right we could say: When we say “sin,” we mean a condition that all of us have. A person in this condition doesn’t truly know God, love him, trust him, fear him, or obey him.

Working from the right to the left, we might say: Our Scriptures teach, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” Jesus pointed out, “Many are called but few are chosen.” But even faithful Christians squirm at hearing that God elects and often won’t even bring up the topic. Why? They’re *conditioned* not to. That is the sinful *condition*—not to truly know, love, trust, fear, and obey God. That is what we mean when we say “sin.”

If Christians were to gain the habit of working with their words in this way, then they would be better equipped to choose appropriate words, and to show in clear and concrete ways why they think their words appropriate. This would benefit them in all kinds of situations: certainly in the church and whenever something Christian is

raised, but also for our politics, especially one that is overrun by meaningless words. They would tend to open conversations, not close them; they would tend to invite further thought, not eliminate new ways of thinking from politics.

A second bad habit of language in politics follows from the first: Not listening to what others actually say, and not attending to what others actually mean. Anyone who regularly uses meaningless words is also unlikely to give the respect and attention needed to discern what others mean. Listening well is essential to all relationships, because listening well reflects empathy, and empathy is necessary to prove one's trustworthiness. Without trust, productive relationships are impossible.

At this point, many people will think, "I'll do it if she does it first." This leads nowhere. Someone needs to go first, and it should be Christians. They know that, in the end, they have nothing to lose, because the future is theirs as a gift of God. Life in the present is for the sake of others, including our enemies and those who persecute us—if there actually are any such people in the United States.

One concrete suggestion for "going first" in this way comes from Daniel Dennett on "Rapoport's Rules." He regards these rules as "the best antidote . . . to caricature one's opponent." The rules are:

1. You should attempt to re-express your target's position so clearly, vividly, and fairly that your target says, "Thanks, I wish I'd thought of putting it that way."
2. You should list any points of agreement (especially if they are not matters of general or widespread agreement).
3. You should mention anything you have learned from your target.
4. Only then are you permitted to say so much as a word of rebuttal or criticism.<sup>25</sup>

Dennett also points out that "going first" works. By following these rules, you can gain receptive listeners in return, because you will have shown both that you understand their positions and have the good judgment to appreciate at least some of what they think. Moreover, you can raise the prospects of appreciation by observing whether their arguments are in the best form and have the strongest support, and, if found lacking in some way, offering ways to improve them.

Here is another suggestion when you have criticisms or doubts: "Give it five minutes." This comes from Alan Jacobs's book *How to Think*:

Jason Fried, the creator of the popular project-management software Basecamp, tells a story about attending a conference and listening to a talk. He didn't like the talk; he didn't agree with the speaker's point of view; as the talk went on he grew more and more agitated. When it was over, he rushed up to the speaker to express his disagreement. The speaker listened, and then said, "Give it five minutes."

Fried was taken aback, but then he realized the point, and the

point's value. After the first few moments of the speaker's lecture, Fried had effectively stopped listening: he had heard something he didn't agree with and immediately entered Refutation Mode—and in Refutation Mode there is no listening. Moreover, when there is no listening there is no *thinking*. To enter Refutation Mode is to say, in effect, that you've already done all the thinking you need to do, that no further information or reflection is required.

Fried was so taken by the speaker's request, he accepted "Give it five minutes" as a kind of personal watchword. It ought to be one for the rest of us, too.<sup>26</sup>

A third bad habit of language in politics is relying on *conspiracy theories*. The claims that a cadre of rich and powerful people planned the pandemic and that Bill Gates wants to use SARS-CoV-2 vaccines to implant microchips to track people are conspiracy theories.

There is nothing new about conspiracy theories in the United States. There were conspiracy theories about the Illuminati at the end of the eighteenth century and against Masons and Catholics in the first half of the nineteenth century. Conspiracy theories about Communism were very strong after World War II. Some of the most well-known political figures of the past sixty years have either been the subject or the perpetrator of conspiracy theories: John Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack Obama, Donald Trump.

Conspiracy theories sometimes prove to be true. They are also necessary in order to investigate a conspiracy and prove a conspiracy. Someone had to hypothesize about Richard Nixon covering up the Watergate break-in before the conspiracy was proven. So we should not dismiss out of hand the subject of either conspiracies or conspiracy theories.

But when private individuals regularly give credence to conspiracy theories, politics suffers. When conspiracy theories flourish, distrust increases: distrust of the government, of the press, and of those ordinary citizens who disregard these theories. At the same time, doubts and suspicions grow about those who show a regular interest in these theories. Distrust, doubts, and suspicions all make politics more difficult. Conspiracy theories also reflect despair. *Dark*, once again, means inscrutable. When politics is in the dark, it is no wonder at all that conspiracy theories spring up about all kinds of matters. They are ways of coping with the dark, providing explanations and giving reasons when it is impossible for us to tell on our own. But they are also signs of desperation, and the more far-fetched the theories become, the more evident the despair.

*Life in the present is  
for the sake of others,  
including our enemies.*

Christians should promote healthy politics, and promoting conspiracy theories is unhealthy for politics and for Christian reputations. Making a habit of relying on conspiracy theories is a way of being distrustful, doubtful, suspicious, and desperate. It is a habit to break. Instead Christians should get into the habit of working within the limits of their knowledge and understanding, and of relying on God through prayer. The motto of the United States is “In God We Trust.” For the government, this is simply a bit of sentimentality, but it is the appropriate motto for Christians and their political engagement in the dark.

## Endnotes

- 1 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 253, 264.
- 2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §125, trans. with commentary by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181. I have noted the parallel between Arnold and Nietzsche before. See “When Salt Loses Its Saltiness: Nihilism and the Contemporary Church,” *Concordia Journal* 44 (2018): 33–49. Malcolm Bull noted a different but related parallel in *Anti-Nietzsche* (London: Verso Books, 2011), 1–26.
- 3 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §125, 182.
- 4 Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 1. The passage by Virginia Woolf is from *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt, 1981).
- 5 Stanley Hauerwas, “Abortion, Theologically Understood,” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 611.
- 6 Hauerwas, “Abortion, Theologically Understood,” 614. A footnote to this passage acknowledged: This is also the view expressed by Pope John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life) AAS 87 (1995), Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1995), section 47. “Certainly *the life of the body in its earthly state is not an absolute good* for the believer, especially as he may be asked to give up his life for a greater good.” (Italics in original.)
- 7 Hauerwas, “Abortion, Theologically Understood,” 614–615.
- 8 The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Time to Listen . . . A Time to Act* (Washington, DC, 1967), 89.
- 9 Todd May and George Yancy, “Policing Is Doing What It Was Meant to Do. That’s the Problem,” *New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/opinion/police-violence-racism-reform.html>, 21 June 2020).
- 10 George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” in *Essays*, Everyman’s Library 242, ed. and intro. by John Carey (New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 954–955.
- 11 Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” 963.
- 12 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §343, 279.
- 13 I explored this development and its implications for the church and her life in “When Salt Loses Its Saltiness: Nihilism and the Contemporary Church,” *Concordia Journal* 44 (2018): 33–49.
- 14 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §152.
- 15 “Archimedes sought but one firm and immovable point in order to move the entire earth from one place to another. Just so, great things are also to be hoped for if I succeed in finding just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshaken.” René Descartes, *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 2006), 13.
- 16 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §335, 263–266. See also MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 113–114.

- 17 Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 71.
- 18 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §152.
- 19 Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," 964.
- 20 The relationship between the gifts of baptism and faith is expressed well in *An Inexpressible Treasure: The Theology and Practice of Holy Baptism*, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis, November 2018), 26.
- 21 Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," 959.
- 22 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73.
- 23 Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," 965.
- 24 Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2, *The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath*, 5th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 14, 17.
- 25 Daniel C. Dennett, *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 33–34.
- 26 Alan Jacobs, *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds* (New York: Currency, 2017), 17–18.



# *Homiletical Helps*



# Anatomy of a Sermon

## A Sermon on Mark 8:27–35

### By Victor Belton

Travis Scholl

*Author's note: the following sermon (in italics below) was preached in the Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, on January 18, 2016. You can listen to an audio recording of the sermon at <https://scholar.csl.edu/cs1516/57/>.*

I believe I first heard Victor Belton preach when I served on a program team of the LCMS National Youth Gathering. If memory serves, it was Atlanta, 1998, “Called to Be,” the first night. He stood alone on the mass-event stage with only a life-size, shimmering reproduction, as best as we might be able to imagine it, of the burning bush that stood before Moses. He preached of Moses taking off his shoes to stand on holy ground. And in the baritone power of his voice and the resonant conviction of his words, he made of that Georgia Dome, on that night, holy ground. All of us—youth and adults alike—were caught dead in our tracks by the law he proclaimed, the awful honesty it required of us, and by the gospel he preached, its full release and wholehearted celebration. I suspect for many in the Georgia Dome that night, it was the first time they heard a sermon from within the Black Lutheran preaching tradition. But it reminded all of us, and this present sermon only confirms, that he is one of the great living preachers in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod today. Period.

By way of introduction, I want to note the particular occasion of the sermon. We often wrestle with how to address civic events and occasions in our preaching. In this particular instance, the date in the church year marked the confession of St. Peter, from which came the Gospel reading that was Belton’s sermon text. But because it also fell on the Monday in January designated as Martin Luther King Jr. Day, it would have been impossible for the preacher to overlook the coincidence, if he even wanted to. Notice how he begins by deftly weaving commonalities he sees in the two occasions—in the lives of Saints Peter and Martin—and then letting the coincidence of the day lead naturally into the one question that propels the whole sermon forward.

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father, from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and from the Holy Spirit, who gives us the confession that opens the gates of righteousness, giving us access to the kingdom of God. Hallelujah. Amen.*

*There is much being celebrated this morning in the realm of both the church and in the realm of society as well. We celebrate the feast day that is the confession of St. Peter in which we are able to discern more clearly the will of God for Jesus the Messiah and his work in the earth. And we celebrate this one come from the Father who advocated the advancement of civil rights using nonviolent civil disobedience as a basis for social reform in our country and even in our world. This broad Christian belief that one ought love thy neighbor as thyself and even better than myself, in the person and work of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr.*

*It's an interesting thing that when I was a student here, and the first time I spoke publicly in the Seminary context, was Martin Luther King Day, back in 1986, before you were born. And I shared the word about the dream of Dr. King that one day his four little children will live in a nation where they would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. King said, "I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final words." So spoke Dr. King. He also spoke of faith, saying, "With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, if necessary, to stand up for freedom together knowing that we will be free one day." I commend to you the entire text of MLK's "I Have a Dream" speech this morning.*

*It is as if both our celebratory causes this morning—Saints Peter and Martin, properly understood—both wrestled with the same issue, and we wrestle with that issue today and ultimately have the same request as the psalmist in our verse for this morning, Psalm 118:19–21: "Open to me the gates of righteousness." Would someone please open the gate "that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord"?*

*This is the gate of the Lord;  
the righteous shall enter through it.  
I thank you that you have answered me  
and have become my salvation.*

At this moment, the preacher uses a verse from the appointed psalm to provide for both the commonality of the two occasions and to make the transition to what he really wants to preach about: opening "the gates of righteousness." Not coincidentally, I believe this homiletical use of a scriptural text to make a turn in the rhetorical flow of the sermon would not have been foreign to what we know of the preaching of either the Apostle Peter or the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Preacher Belton, though, extends the metaphor to intensify the tension of the sermon. If the psalmist has arrived at the gate, how can it be opened?

*We would have open gates this morning. We would have the gates of righteousness unlocked. We would have the way unlocked to justice in the earth. We would have the gate open so that joy and righteousness, peace and deliverance, are received. So that we by faith may enter, find rest, and give thanks unto the Lord our God. We would have the gates open so that we might behold the righteous goodness of the Lord and dwell in his presence.*

*But we are mired with sin in these earth-suits, and can in no manner set ourselves free. And so, there seems no one who's able to find the key that may unlock the gates, so that we may enter. Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy upon us. We need a key. We require a key. But where might we find so great and precious and golden a key to unlock the very gates of righteousness?*

*We have God's word. Is that the key? Well, maybe not, because even Satan knows that and quotes it well, even in the face of God.*

*We have baptism. Is that the key? Well, probably not in and of itself, because we all get wet, some point or another.*

*Ah, the meal, the Supper, the Great Thanksgiving, the body and the blood. Is that the key? Hmm, the key to gluttony and drunkenness for some.*

*But the key, the immutable, indisputable key that will open for us the gates of righteousness: Lord, where shall we find such a treasure?*

Although the preacher has not yet come to the point of resolving this tension, this would be the moment where I sense the tension is felt most intensely. I am quite certain that Preacher Belton knew exactly what he was doing by naming the previous alternative answers attempting to identify “the key” that will “unlock the very gates of righteousness.” They hit close to home, just as they are intended. Eliminating false alternatives to move an oration forward to its central idea is a common rhetorical move, but here the preacher is not using it to confirm what the hearer already knows, but to prick the thin skin of our own theological self-assurances. In our minds, we may have an idea where the preacher is going with it, but we are left wondering how the preacher will get there and if we might have to lose a few more false convictions along the way. All of which sets the preacher up to pivot again to the Scriptures.

*Saint Paul says in Romans 10: “But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth, in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim).” The key, the golden key. It's near you because “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” The word is the key, the confession, the proclamation. Is this the great treasure?*

I want to note here that the preacher makes a nuanced distinction that is easy to gloss over. It would have been easier to simply proclaim, “Jesus is the key.” But, drawing on Paul’s teaching in a direct parallel to what is going on in the Gospel text, it is the confession—“the word of faith”—about *who Jesus is* that is the key, even as the preacher does not yet want to make that the final answer to his question. As we shall see, this nuance opens up new possibilities for the preacher’s proclamation as it applies to his hearers’ lives.

*Well, let’s ask Saint Peter. “Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’” I esteem in my sanctified imagination that another way of asking that question is, “What power and authority do people say that I have? Do people see me as simply a guy who can feed with loaves and fishes, who can heal a few sick people, who can heal a couple of blind or lame? Or do they esteem that there’s something more of me than they can grasp?*

*“And they said to him, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.’” Great answers, but John the Baptist told them “I’m not the one.” Elijah never claimed to be the one. The prophets come to bear witness to the one. So, John, do you have the key? Are you the key? Can you unlock for me the gates of righteousness?*

Notice how the preacher, in his “sanctified imagination,” now locates the one question that propels the sermon forward within the narrative of the Gospel text itself. This allows him to do two things: (1) to reiterate the question in a new and fresh way, and (2) to amplify the tension one last time before opening the valve for its release. At this moment, you can hear—even more, you can feel in your gut—the pleading in Preacher Belton’s voice, and it allows him to place the proclamation into the mouths of the biblical prophets he has just invoked . . . until he gets to Peter.

*And I see John padding around in his camel hair suit, clearing locusts out of his beard, and saying, “Nope, no keys.” Elijah untucks his clothes. No keys fall. The other prophets know and testify to many things regarding our Father, but they have no key to the gates of righteousness. Moses, the great lawgiver, the great man of God, has no key.*

*Peter is the first who almost stumbles over the key that unlocks the gates of righteousness, in his response to the question of Jesus, “Who do men say that I am?” Peter said, “You are the Christ.”*

*“Who do you say?” “You are the Christ.” You hear that?*

*“You are the Christ.” That sounds like the dropping of a key. The key to the*

*gates of righteousness is in the confession. "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the desire of ages, the bright and morning star." And I hear creaking gates of righteousness open and grace fall full face into the Earth. "You are the Christ, the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valley, our great Emmanuel, God with us. You are the key that unlocks the gate of righteousness. Hallelujah!*

*And I see Jesus stricken, smitten, and afflicted lying upon the cross bearing our griefs, carrying our sorrow, tears for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquity. Yet, bearing the chastisement that brings us peace and wounds that mark our healing that we may have access to the key that opens the gates of righteousness.*

"You hear that?" I almost hate to interrupt the sermonic flow, but here is preaching Jesus straight up as the Christ, "the key that opens the gates of righteousness." Notice how the preacher explores the sensory possibilities—primarily auditory—within the metaphor: "That sounds like the dropping of a key . . . I hear creaking gates . . ." The auditory language here complements the visionary language: "And I see John . . . And I see Jesus . . ." All of these sensory details are then interwoven with various biblical echoes in the names and titles ascribed to Jesus along with an allusion to one of our most cherished Good Friday hymns. This makes Preacher Belton's proclamation of the Gospel full-bodied and experiential in a rhythm that is a hallmark of the Black preaching tradition. Or, as the homiletician Henry Mitchell would put it, this is how the proclamation engages the "whole person": "The use of biblical texts achieves the goal that hearers of the Word be equipped with a repertoire of quotable gut beliefs: texts by which their very lives are sustained and ordered in the same way exemplified by Jesus. . . . Suffice it to say that when the whole person is reached, the whole person is nourished and strengthened."<sup>1</sup>

The rising pace of this proclamation is sustained by the clear, direct sentence structures throughout. I do not know if Preacher Belton wrote out a manuscript prior to delivery (I know that he rarely preaches from a manuscript in the pulpit), but if he did, it is an excellent example of what we would call "writing for the ear" (as opposed to the eye). By limiting the number of dependent clauses and alternating short and long sentences, for example, the preacher is able to maintain control over pacing, speed, and rhythm in response not only to the feedback he senses from the assembly but also in the flow of the sermonic event itself. In creative writing terms, these are all techniques related to cultivating voice in our language.

*"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." That confession is the key through which we gain access to the gates of righteousness, the kingdom of God in our hearts and the kingdom of heaven in the age to come.*

*Somebody just ought to say, "Hallelujah!"*

*Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of God. That confession is the key that opens*

*the gates of righteousness, grants us access that we may enter through them and give thanks unto the Lord.*

*Jesus is the Messiah of God. This confession opens the gates of the Lord and the righteous shall enter through it.*

“Somebody just ought to say, ‘Hallelujah!’” Lutheran Christians are rightly and well known for our proclamation of a free and pure gospel, thanks be to God. But we don’t always know how to “celebrate” the gospel in our preaching. But in this regard, Henry Mitchell’s homiletical work on what he names as “celebration” in preaching, coming out of Black church traditions, can resonate with a theology that insists emphatically that there is nothing we can do to earn the grace God so freely gives. If that is indeed true, how can we keep from singing? Again, Mitchell: “Authentic gospel feasting begets its own irresistible celebration; to hold it back or inhibit it is to lose the joy itself, along with the whole message.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Preacher Belton, coming out of the Black Lutheran tradition, has made a career out of doing it well. For those of us who do not come out of the Black church, we dare not mimic a false sense of celebration. But that does not relieve us of the responsibility to intentionally think through how we might embody an authentic sense of celebration that is true to our own preacherly persona and to our own experience of the joy of the gospel. “And there is the preacher’s own spirit, facial expression, and tonal qualities, which serve as vehicles of contagious celebration.”<sup>3</sup> It may be as simple as the way a smile beams new light upon our face in that moment when we give witness to a word that is indeed good news.

And yet, that good news now has immediate, equally full-bodied, implications for how we will live in the world. I will let Preacher Belton have that last word, as he circles back around again to the original events that gave rise to this occasion for preaching, a final convergence between the lives of “Saints Peter and Martin” . . . and you and me.

*We know from Saints Peter and Martin that opening that gate to glory may mean suffering on earth. But it is bearable, and even in the face of rejection, threats, and even death we can say, “Thanks be to God. You have answered me. You’ve become my salvation. And you granted me this grace, the key that unlocks the gates of righteousness. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and the key that opens the gate.” So, make it so, Lord!*

*Maranatha! Come, Lord. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.*

## Endnotes

1. Henry H. Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 39.
2. *Ibid.*, 66.
3. *Ibid.*, 71.

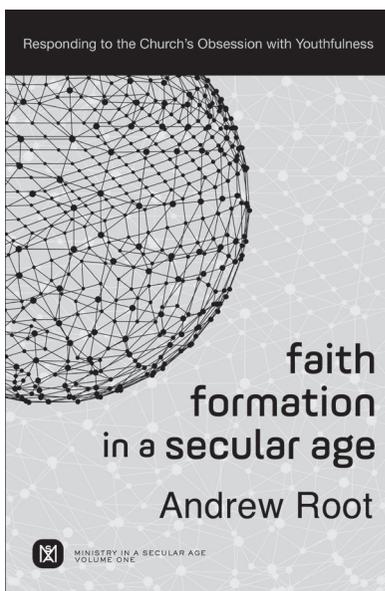
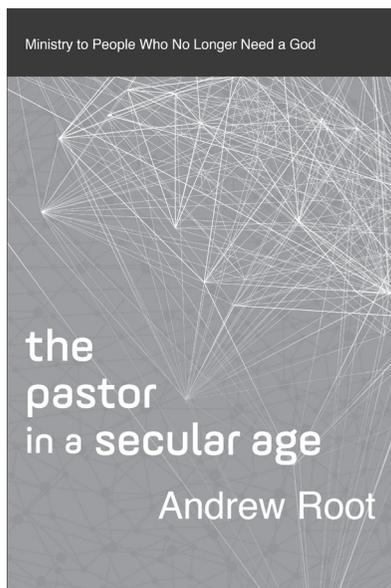
# *Reviews*



**THE PASTOR IN A SECULAR AGE: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God.** By Andrew Root. Baker Academic, 2019. Paper. 320 pages. \$26.99.

**FAITH FORMATION IN A SECULAR AGE: Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness.** By Andrew Root. Baker Academic, 2017. Paper. 240 pages. \$24.99.

*Faith Formation in a Secular Age* and *The Pastor in a Secular Age* by Andrew Root are descriptive and constructive discussions with the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's magnum opus *A Secular Age* (2007). Taylor's vast and important work unfolds how our secular age is not devoid of religion, but an age in which past religious impulses linger in yearnings for the possibility of transcendence. While *A Secular Age* is



sprawling and dense, Root's two volumes are concise and provide pastors with congregationally focused applications of Taylor's ideas. These two volumes address ministry and mission in the context of twenty-first-century North America, specifically, how our secular age challenges and changes what it means to be a pastor (vol. 2, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*), and how Taylor's articulation of our age of authenticity affects contemporary faith formation (vol. 1, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*). Root encourages busy pastors to read *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, or volume 2, first, for while these may be hard times for pastors, Root affirms that the pastor remains central to the events of God's activity in the world. Each volume provides on-the-go pastors a synopsis of Taylor's theses in *A Secular Age*, and concludes with applicable and

contemporary theological reflection on God as ministering pastor (vol. 2), and moving from youth ministry to a youthful spirit in ministry (vol. 1).

Following Root's advice, we begin with *The Pastor in a Secular Age*. Root asserts throughout the book that ministry is not a profession or human action, instead "ministry is the very event that unveils God's action in the world" (xvi). Drawing on the work of Taylor, *The Pastor in a Secular Age* sketches the story in two parts with a coda of how our secular age has "slowly erased the transcendent referent that would make the pastor ultimately needed" (xxi). Part 1 tells the story of our secular age and the challenges this poses for pastors through historically mapping types of past pastors who primarily served in congregational contexts, and who confronted and changed what Taylor terms our Western social imaginary (24), or how we conceive and construct society, and features the hodgepodge of Thomas Beckett, Augustine, Jonathan Edwards, Henry Ward Beecher, Henry Emory Fosdick, and Rick Warren. Root adds a bridge after part 1 exploring the French philosopher Michel Foucault's lectures on pastoral power, a move which echoes Thomas Aquinas's famous dictum that philosophy serves theology. Again, mindful of hectic ministry schedules, Root explains Foucault's fascinating lectures on how the contours of governmental power in the Western world is birthed by and embedded in the pastoral (153). Thus, the construction

of Western government is shaped by the Middle Eastern shepherding ethos of ministry. As with Taylor, Root shows how Foucault's ideas reveal that our secular age is spiritually complicated and indebted to a collective religious past, to which he surmises "It is no wonder that to most pastors, pastoral power feels like wearing clothes from college; they are so familiar and yet don't quite fit" (167). Instead of seeking to make old clothes fit, part 2 addresses the malaise of "opaqueness of divine action" (169) by focusing on God as minister who arrives, speaks, sees, names, raises, and acts in the practice of prayer. God, as Root claims, "is not ontologically a story, but an event of arriving, a personal being that shows up" (201). For Root, ministry occurs when pastors show up, especially in the immanent frame of praying through the stories of their members as a way to see God arriving (279).

Root imparts to pastors numerous insights in adeptly applying Taylor's and Foucault's ideas to being a pastor in a secular age. While part 1 lingers on the frustrating challenges of being a pastor in a secular age, part 2 provides ministry-specific biblical applications and personal vignettes through a study of portions of the Old Testament which function as devotional inspiration for pastors. As Root repeatedly reminds us, ministry begins and ends with pastors showing up, sharing in the event of thanks or need, and staying in moments of joy and grief, life and death. While our secular age poses problems, pastors press on by being present with their

members in the poignant moments of life. In order to further this pastoral presence, Root comments, “To be seeker sensitive is not to shape your building like a movie theater or by using huge screens, but instead it is to create space to answer questions about the events of our lives so that we might recognize that it is God who seeks us” (227). Root’s commentary is grounded in the triune God as minister: “To know the name Yahweh is more like using a nickname for the one you love,” indeed, to know the name of God “is to be an intimate friend; it is to have a place in that person’s being through personal encounter” (243). As Root emphasizes, the Cappadocians show that hypostatic ministry “is a being bound in encounter” (261), which makes the core focus of pastoral ministry in a secular age “to help people spot in their encounter with persons the concrete presence of the living Jesus” (264). Root concludes with the pastor present in prayer. *The Pastor in a Secular Age* leaves pastors wanting more to offer than prayer, and notably lacks discussion on preaching, the prophetic role of ministry, and presence in the public square. Prayer is powerful but so is proclamation.

*Faith Formation in a Secular Age* addresses teaching the faith by focusing on the nature of faith. Youthfulness, as Root observes, is now not marked by years, but rather comprises a way of thinking and living that realizes authenticity. An Instagram post from Humans of New York illustrates Root’s point: a middle-aged man with a

lucrative career desires to work until he makes enough to retire and live like a carefree young adult. Like *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, part 1 explains Taylor’s ideas by centering on our age of authenticity, and tells the story of how and why we idealize and worship youthfulness. Root journeys through the last century from the rise of mass consumer society, to the shift from conformity to cool and Jesus freaks to bourgeois bohemians (bobos, from David Brooks), to the overarching loss of transcendence. This “philosophical genealogy” exhibits our pervasive obsession with youthfulness (93). Part 2 examines theologically what faith is and how it is formed, and seeks to make God’s activity foundational for faith formation to the cultural currents of nones and MTD (Moralistic Therapeutic Deism). Faith, according to Root, is not an idea or category, and faith formation should not be used to keep young people from slipping away from faith. “Faith is to experience the encounter of Christ through the negation of the cross” (119). Root emphasizes throughout part 2 that faith means to enter into Christ, and “have our own being taken into the being of Jesus” (120). Faith, therein, for Root, “is always participation in the narrative arc of Jesus’s cross and resurrection by having your person ministered to and ministering to others” (149). Root conceives of faith as theosis (179), which serves as the basis of faith formation, and contrasts the therapeutic (staying happy) with kenosis (serving

others). Faith, for Root, ultimately translates into the real presence of Jesus so that we can be present as ministers for others (198).

The conclusion of *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* proposes ponderings on moving from specific youth ministry to envisioning the entire congregation as ministers actively present to all ages. Thus, for Root, faith formation is not primarily catechesis, but being a community of persons that practice gratitude, giftedness, and rest. Root sums this up by stating that in our secular age, the veracity of Christianity is realized not in the memorization of doctrines, “but to hear its story told through the ministerial action of persons embracing and loving your own person as the act of ministry” (211). *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* is not a how-to book on teaching the faith but a contemplation on formation: where we are and how we got here (part 1), and who we are and how we can more fully be the body of Christ in the world (part 2). While Root connects faith with the vocation of presence, there abides the need for teaching doctrines, which he ultimately fails to address. Furthermore, presence in our present age can be ambiguous. Root’s predilection for theosis blurs the lines between Christ’s person and work and human agency. Authenticity in faith formation requires not only living in and for Christ, but also passing on from one generation to the next ancient and clear articulations of what Christians believe and why they believe it. In the end, both volumes are

thoughtful theological constructions of Taylor’s ideas for ministry today.

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**CHRISTIAN CHARACTER  
FORMATION: Lutheran Studies  
of the Law, Anthropology,  
Worship, and Virtue.** By Gifford A.  
Grobien. *Oxford Studies in Theological  
Ethics.* Oxford University Press, 2019.  
Hardcover. 272 pages. \$90.00.

There are many reasons to read a book, of course. One reads some, perhaps most, books out of obligation or necessity, others, typically a much smaller number I suspect, are read for pure pleasure. And then there are a rare number of books which are read with a sense of total engagement and a consuming investment driven either by the topic or the author or both. For me, Gifford Grobien’s book fell into this atypical final category. A book from a brother LCMS professor with a title like this were all the reasons needed to compel a meticulous and anxious reading of the text. While most doctrinal reading is probably not intended to generate anxiety in the reader, this book kept me on the edge of my seat, unable to relax, almost to the final page. My poignant unease centered on a single concern: would this book probing sanctification from a Lutheran perspective fall prey to the pervasively common reduction of the law to its second, condemning function

while categorically excluding it from any positive role in the life of the believer?

The book starts with a strong and hopeful tone that confronts and rejects this mistaken but ubiquitous notion head-on. “Accusation and instruction are not mutually exclusive, but intertwining properties of the law for human beings in this world” (31). And happily, Grobien was exactly on target in his grasp of Luther, noting that the great reformer “refers to the permanency of the law, not only as continuing to call the Christian to repentance, but as the will of God which remains even in eternity” (32). This was encouraging, indeed. I held my breath as I turned each page dreading the possibility that a monograph unfolding so delightfully as a faithful reading of Luther and a right Lutheran understanding of the law and ethics might still manage to stray or trip headlong into the pit of third-use-denying Lutheran antinomianism. A scant four pages from the end, however, I read this, “Thus a person who views the Commandments only as condemning does not yet truly know the Commandments and the Scriptures . . . There is a “third function” of the Law, the function of instructing the believer in virtuous living” (221). My anxiety had been groundless all along—yet not without benefit, sustaining an exceedingly careful reading of the text.

This is a good book that obviously does far more than advocate for a positive role for the law in the life of a believer. Grobien’s primary objective is to advance the conversation

about Christian character formation specifically by exploring the avenues and ways in which this formation occurs in the context of the believer’s union with Christ and worship. Worship matters since God, who is the author and perfecter of faith, does his work in the Christian through the means of grace powerfully and regularly delivered in the divine service. Thus, Grobien rightly argues, it is worship itself which is essential in the practical work of forming people to live virtuous lives of service to the neighbor. But, this advocacy of the centrality of the means of grace is not so facile as the reduction that God gives, and the Christian then spontaneously does. Rather, as a composite of multilayered, substantive practices—in a rich sense that transcends even that of MacIntyre, since the practices of worship are used and infused with the Holy Spirit—worship habituates and shapes God’s people to think and live like God’s people (184). This lucid emphasis on the dual aspect of worship as at once God’s work and a human activity contributes significantly, I think, toward answering those who contend that in reality the practices of worship seem too often unsuccessful in the formation of Christian people.

The other and foundational focus of Grobien’s book is a rather thorough consideration of theosis. The book contends that the scriptural and doctrinal truth of the believer’s union with Christ is essential for understanding the actual work of Christian formation. En route to making this case, Grobien

provides a rather sympathetic and helpful reading of theologians associated with the Finnish school of Luther interpretation. He concludes that union with Christ, or the indwelling of God, is the basis and the animating power at work in the Christian, and theosis “may be understood as renewal, the growth in the Christian life which occurs within the work of Christian sanctification” (124). As Grobien uses the term, theosis does not mean a loss of self in an eastern sense of convergence with God, but “transformation in one’s understanding of oneself as a creature of God, and in the desire and strength to pursue actions and the way of life consonant with this identity” (125). The upshot of a full two chapters dedicated to the careful consideration of what exactly it means to be in Christ (union) and striving to become like God (theosis) is a solid affirmation of the active righteousness of the believer who “has his own, inchoate, proper righteousness, imparted by Christ” (142). Granting my own published overreaction against the term *theosis* (politely footnoted by the author! (89)), and while acknowledging the legitimacy of the term, I’m still not likely to incorporate the word as a standard part of my ethics vocabulary anytime soon—though I do embrace the basic ideas Grobien advances.

It was a genuine joy to read *Christian Character Formation*—a joy to realize my book-long anxiety was in the end unfounded. Grobien has made a substantial contribution to an important and ongoing discussion about

the formation of followers of Christ and the place of ethics in the doctrinal task. For me, the only anxiety that lingers is that the formidable price on this OUP publication may hinder the wide reading that this book deserves—especially, I might add, by those who remain stubbornly resistant to the truth that the two kinds of righteousness (active and passive, and both decidedly good in the life of the believer!) is actually a faithful Lutheran teaching.

*Joel Biermann*

***HIGH ON GOD: How Megachurches Won the Heart of America.*** By James K. Wellman Jr., Katie E. Corcoran, and Kate J. Stockly. Oxford, 2020. Hardcover. 352 Pages. \$24.95.

This study on megachurches is helpful for those interested in American Christianity. Megachurches, as a sufficient form of devotion for their adherents, are studied through a secular sociological analysis. The audience for the book is expected to be secular scholars and the authors expect to challenge many existing presuppositions. While that does not describe readers of this journal necessarily, this kind of sociological analysis may challenge and help correct several of our own assumptions about megachurches.

Megachurches tend to act in similar ways for their adherents. The authors use two theories—the sociologist Randall Collins’s interaction ritual chains of group behavior and Emile Durkheim’s construct of *homo duplex*—to ground

their analysis of the need for humans to be distinct individuals and part of a collective whole.

They argue that religious motivation is built on emotional energy embodied in believers rather than merely an intellectual exercise. People act religiously to meet the emotional needs of the body largely emotively rather than to satisfy an intellectual curiosity. Among those needs are meaning and community through an individual's affect. Megachurches are incredibly good at filling this need through emotional energy that acts in many ways like a drug—leading people to a kind of religious ecstasy. Through a charismatic senior pastor, which they call an energy star, megachurches use emotional energy to effect emotions in their congregation through dynamic messages and the setting of being among a crowd experiencing the same thing. This leads to a kind of emotional ecstasy and, they argue, releases oxytocin in the body just as a drug would.

They recognize that such an emotional “high” will never be permanent. Megachurches, in order to be successful, must hold together six complex characteristics: (1) a sense of belonging and welcome; (2) a sense of awe and sensory stimulation; (3) a reliable leader; (4) a feeling of deliverance; (5) new purpose and identity; (6) a process of re-membering. This final step of “re-membering” leads people to move beyond that initial emotional “high” and to become committed to the church through intimate fellowship, usually through small groups.

The authors also analyze the dark side of megachurches such as reliance and focus of the community upon a particular pastor. As such, they consider the scandals tied to pastors and the subsequent closing of those megachurches.

While the book is valuable, readers of this journal may be concerned about one element of the book mostly relegated to an appendix. As a religious studies approach, the authors consider religion, and this element of a religious ecstasy, as an eventual need of humans based upon anthropology from evolutionary biology. Many may think this relegates religion to nothing more than a human experience, but I would encourage readers to consider the need that religion serves for people to be accurate, even if we theologically disagree about the source of that same need. More importantly, though, this book was written from data through interviews with members of megachurches. What this book does not address, then, are those who, after the initial “high” of the megachurch, did *not* re-member and become lasting members of the community and have left the megachurches seeking something else. Many Lutherans have anecdotal evidence of former members of megachurches joining our congregations as they did not make this shift and found the megachurch wanting. Because the authors only interviewed those still members of churches, they did not present data on those who left, and thereby an aspect many would be interested in cannot be addressed here.

In all, this book will help readers consider this megachurch movement in America afresh and help us to understand what is happening from an academically sound data source rather than relying only on anecdotal evidence.

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**PRAYERBOOK OF CHRIST: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological Interpretation of the Psalms.**

*By Brad Pribbenow. Lexington Books/ Fortress Academic, 2018. Hardcover. 248 pages. \$95.00.*

Although Dietrich Bonhoeffer is the subject of much recent theology, his interpretations of the Bible remain under studied, especially in English. Even *Discipleship* and *Creation and Fall*—the two most commonly cited among theologians (at least in my reading)—tend to get mined for theological data rather than understood in terms of the biblical exegesis itself. Bonhoeffer's view of the Psalms, in particular, has not received much attention, and Brad Pribbenow's book is a helpful entrée into this space. Pribbenow, who teaches Old Testament at Lutheran Brethren Seminary and first wrote this book as a dissertation at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, offers a "chronological study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms," examining Bonhoeffer's engagement with the Psalms from a 1926 sermon through his prison letters (1944).

Pribbenow's book is organized into three parts. The first part briefly

discusses christological interpretations of the Psalms in pre-modernity and in Luther, and the rejection of such interpretations during modernity. The second part situates Bonhoeffer in the early twentieth century and shows the development of his christological hermeneutic, which finds its climax in writings from the Finkenwalde period (including *The Prayerbook of the Bible*). The third part of the book investigates Bonhoeffer's later uses of the Psalms, especially Psalm 119 and during his imprisonment. Throughout this third part, Pribbenow includes some helpful tables that chart Bonhoeffer's references to Psalm 119 across his corpus and organize all references to the Psalms from Bonhoeffer's prison writings by categorizing them according to genre of the source, date of usage, and the *Prayerbook* categories. Pribbenow's chronological study demonstrates not only how Bonhoeffer's christological interpretation of the Psalms developed in relation to other interpretations, but also how his hermeneutic changes post-Finkenwalde.

Pribbenow's careful study of Bonhoeffer's use of the Psalms is the most valuable part of the book, but in the second part Pribbenow also argues that Bonhoeffer's christological hermeneutic is unique within the history of the church. For Pribbenow, Bonhoeffer establishes two pillars for his interpretation: the practice of prayer itself and the crucified Christ (56). What makes Bonhoeffer's interpretation exceptional is his "unique emphasis

on the historical reality of Jesus's own use of the Psalms in his incarnation" (54). For Pribbenow, Bonhoeffer's approach is similar to the typological interpretations of pre-modernity but also unique because "the reality of Jesus Christ's praying the Psalms in his incarnation" is the "central and controlling interpretative factor" for understanding and applying the Psalms (54). Surprisingly, Bonhoeffer's focus on Christ's own historical prayers does not abstract the psalter from its application in the church. Instead, Bonhoeffer shapes how the church, facing threats and enemies, must pray the Psalms as its own prayers in reference to Christ and his historical life. As Pribbenow explains with regard to a sermon on psalm 58, "In response to a pressing need in the church-community, [Bonhoeffer] turns to this psalm which seems to express the emotions and concerns of his community to the threats which surround them" (80). Psalm 58, and every other psalm, becomes the prayer of the church precisely in and through Jesus Christ. The emotions and concerns of the psalm are rightly the church's but only through Jesus.

For anyone interested in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thought or development, Pribbenow's book is a necessary read. I found the text to be engaging and interesting. Two minor quibbles: the book suffers from rather shallow descriptions of modern scholarship, and Bonhoeffer's Christology isn't given the necessary space to make more sense of Bonhoeffer's odd reading

of the Psalms. Overall, Pribbenow's engagement with Bonhoeffer shows how Bonhoeffer interpreted the Psalms for the church, rejecting the legacy of liberal Protestantism and recovering the ancient church's willingness to read the Psalms about, with, and in Christ. For this task, the church can learn from Bonhoeffer with Pribbenow as a guide.

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**CANCER—NOW WHAT?: Taking Action, Finding Hope, and Navigating the Journey Ahead.** By Kenneth C. Haugk Stephen Ministries, 2017. Paper. 345 pages. \$18.95.

I write this book review with my father currently suffering from stage 4 cancer. When I was on vicarage in 2016, my father was diagnosed with prostate cancer. During my fourth year at the seminary, a friend of mine gave me *Cancer—Now What?* as a tool to help with the reality of my father's cancer. Dr. Kenneth C. Haugk gives a lay-of-the-land perspective of a cancer diagnosis for both the patient and family. Haugk's approach to writing about cancer is quite helpful as each topic in the book could have been bogged down with minutia that does not apply to every cancer diagnosis; his approach does not lose the reader in the details. *Cancer—Now What?* serves as a field manual for a cancer diagnosis giving you the information you need up front for any given topic while allowing

each cancer patient to delve deeper with their medical team according to their own diagnosis. The book is in twelve parts. Each part may be read as a stand-alone article without needing to read previous chapters. I found this made the book easily approachable as I was able to read parts that were of concern to me first without having to get through parts of the book that were not applicable to my family's situation.

Several sections of the book seek to demystify the cancer treatment process. For instance, in his section on clinical trials, Haugk debunks several myths including the myth that clinical trials are "wild experimentations" (96). For my own reading, Haugk's treatment of pain management was very relevant as my father's prostate cancer has developed into painful metastatic bone cancer. My family's experience with the side effects of medication is reflected in Haugk's treatment in the book. One rule my family has learned is to "be prepared" for my father's fatigue when taking him to doctor's appointments, holidays, and other excursions. In line with Haugk's recommendation, my wife and I set up a special room for my father so he can crash during holidays such as Christmas and Easter (118).

The greatest section in this book for my family's journey with cancer is part 11 of the book: Spiritual Matters. Through all this the church has continually provided constant support for my father. Haugk's description of cancer being a spiritual roller coaster resonates. While my father's story has

not had many "ups," even being in a steady state is good news to us. When the lows come, we do feel as though we have entered an abyss. However, Haugk quickly points to the gospel when he states, "you may be surprised by a new, greater awareness of Good in the midst of your pain, finding God's love and compassion drawing you close when you're suffering most" (307). The congregation where my father is a member showers him with God's mercy, by giving him car rides to all his doctor's appointments. Likewise, he is in the prayers of many congregations throughout the world. Having that Christian community in his life has made a huge difference in both his spiritual life and mine. As a Christian community, we are called to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2).

The great benefit of *Cancer—Now What?* is the intentional spiritual focus Haugk brings to bear in the fight against cancer. As a sorrow-bearing community, we have the comforting hope of the gospel and the defeat of cancer and death through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the last chapter, Haugk commends "paying it forward" by becoming an advocate and sharing your experiences (325). I hope this review in whatever small way fulfills the vocation of cancer advocate. Stephen Ministries provides a helpful light in the darkness of a cancer diagnosis. I wholly recommend *Cancer—Now What?* to anyone, both patients and their loved ones, suffering from cancer. Pastors may give this book out

to parishioners and their loved ones who are suffering from cancer to help provide them with a lay-of-the-land perspective on this dreadful disease.

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*Aviston, Illinois*





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*"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." (Prov. 3:5-6 ESV)*



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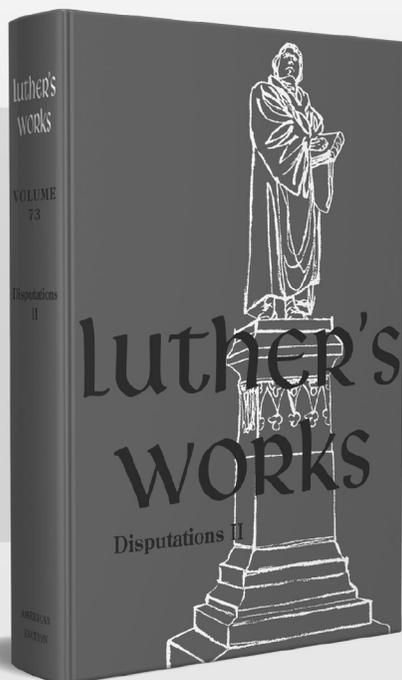


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