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On the cover: the resurrection window in the sanctuary of the Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus on the campus of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis (photo: Harold Rau).

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Editor's Note

I was recently reminded that the word *nostalgia* has Greek roots: *nostos* for home and *algia* (from *algos*) for pain, longing, loss. But the Greek roots aren't ancient. The word was invented by the Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer in the dissertation he completed in 1688. Thus, nostalgia is distinctively modern in a way that is meant to feel, ironically enough, nostalgically ancient. In her landmark study *The Future of Nostalgia*, the late literary scholar Svetlana Boym distinguished between what she called “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia. In her own words:

Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. . . . Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time. (41)

Restorative nostalgia erects monuments to a repristinated past; reflective nostalgia sits among the left-behind ruins. One glorifies while the other laments. Versions of history, memory, truth, and hope are all involved in either process.

I mention it because during Lent we marked the one-year anniversary of COVID-19 designated as a global pandemic. We were saturated again in the images our minds made of what March 2020 was like, when the word *zoom* became both verb and noun. Of the many memories I could recount, I recall our own editorial hand-wringing as we were caught in the planning for the Spring 2020 issue of this journal. As congregations scrambled to move their entire ministries into virtual space, we wondered what could we possibly publish that could be of any help?

We placed upon the cover of that issue a photograph of the scaffolding inside the Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus as new stained-glass windows were being placed in its sacred space. We meant it to stand as a symbol that even when our sanctuaries sit empty—or even now, half-filled—God is still at work, doing something new.

This issue's cover carries a photograph of the completed stained-glass window, its turning of light and color. It is not a “monument of the past.” It is a “dream of another place and another time.”

No, it is more than a dream.

It strikes me that Easter is how God, in the person of the resurrected Christ, turns the aching for a lost home to the confident courage of hope. It arises in the whisper of the One who breathes peace into the still locked-down upper rooms of

our hearts. Thus, perhaps I might propose a third kind of nostalgia, an *eschatological* nostalgia that dwells in the already/not-yet tension between the loss of a home that was never as good as we remember it and the promise of a future home that is way wilder than our best dreams.

Travis J. Scholl
Managing Editor of Theological Publications

About the articles in this issue

The first two are written in the way you have come to expect theological work in the *Concordia Journal*, written by two preeminent scholars of their respective fields, Robert Kolb and Joel Elowsky. The second two are written in what I would call an “essayistic” mode. Where scholarly writing is technical and rigorous, aiming for a convincing argument, essayistic writing is more literary and speculative, aiming for the curiosities of conversation. The latter two are no less theological, but they communicate in this different register or “voice.” In years past, the *Concordia Journal* published similar pieces in what was categorized then as Theological Observers. We welcome your feedback on your experience of reading them. Please email us at cj@csl.edu.

In Memoriam: Carl Schalk (1929–2021)

If you ever had a chance to chat with Carl Schalk, you would certainly remember the twinkle in his eye and sentences primed for a bit of wit. I had a few occasions to experience this over the past fifty years but mainly I have watched his life's work from a distance. What I observed suggests that he should be remembered as “Mr. Church Music,” an appellation that is not mine. I heard it used of him long ago.

Schalk's high school and college education prepared him to be a teacher-musician in a parochial school of a Lutheran congregation. Indeed, his first position (from 1952 to 1958) was to teach and to direct music at Zion Lutheran Church in Wausau, Wisconsin. For the next seven years he was director of music for the International Lutheran Hour, which broadened his experience with the church and its mission. His vision of music in the worship life of a congregation never left him as he gained more skills in music theory (MMus from Eastman School of Music), a deeper acquaintance with theology (MAR from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis) and in 1965 began educating musicians for the church as a professor of music at Concordia College (later University), River Forest, Illinois. There he led choral groups, edited the journal *Church Music* (1966–1980) and helped establish a Master of Church Music program. He took on many other tasks that shaped music in the church, for example, as a member of the Music Advisory Committee of Concordia Publishing House and as a member of the committee which prepared the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978). To assist others in understanding the history and practice of music among Lutherans he wrote more than seventy articles and essays for various journals and edited and authored more than twenty publications, everything from small pamphlets to reference works. Three books seem notable: a group of summary essays in *Key Words in Church Music*; a brief history, *Music in Early Lutheranism: Shaping the Tradition (1524–1672)* and what had started as a hobby, collecting hymnals published by Lutherans in the United States, led him to tell their story in *God's Song in a New Land: Lutheran Hymnals in America*.

His compositions were mostly choral pieces intended for worship in a congregation, whether it had modest, moderate, or abundant resources for musical performance. It is obvious that he viewed the task of writing music as something for those who were well-schooled in the art of music and could continue the long and rich history of Lutheran music. For him artful musical design was necessary, trite patterns, meant to satisfy listeners' ears, were to be avoided and oversized, fancy pieces were best reserved for concert halls. A church composer's task was to help deliver the divine message so the Holy Spirit could move a believing heart to trust God and serve the Lord. This led him to publish more than two hundred of his own pieces and more than sixty publications with works by other ancient and modern composers.

His interest in hymnody eventually turned to inventing melodies for new texts and once in a while for an old text with a tune that had lost favor. His crafting of melodies took off in 1969 when he wrote the tune for Jaroslav J. Vajda's "Now." It grew to more than twenty other melodies for Vajda's poetry and numerous tunes for hymn texts by other authors, including Martin Franzmann, Henry Letterman, F. Pratt Green, Timothy Dudley Smith, Susan Cherwien, and Stephen Starke. In all there are more than eighty hymn and carol melodies by Carl and some of them made their way into hymnals of more than thirty denominations. Five of Carl's tunes are included in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and four in the *Lutheran Service Book*.

As a writer and lecturer, he argued for employing principles that drove the Lutheran heritage of church music. His theological themes were drawn primarily from Luther. One finds an emphasis on music as the "*viva vox evangelii*," namely, that hymns and choral music can both express the praise of God and proclaim Jesus's saving work. Understanding this, he maintained, is the key for every church musician who wants to analyze problems and find good solutions for the present age. This theme is easily seen in a collection of Carl's writings titled *Singing the Church's Song* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2015).

Schalk carried these insights to many organizations—the Lutheran Music Program (later the Summer Music Program), the Hymn Society of the United States and Canada, and the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians. He was always ready to share his vision of how music could serve God's mission. While his feet were planted in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, his winsome erudition gave him frequent voice among Lutherans and other Christians in North America.

May Carl Schalk's words and music echo widely for years to come.

James L. Brauer
Professor Emeritus

Articles

Christian Freedom and the Government

Joel Elowsky



Joel Elowsky is professor of historical theology and coordinator of International Seminary Exchange Programs at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He also is the director of the Seminary's Center for the Study

of Early Christian Texts and is a researcher for the Center for Early African Christianity at Yale University. His interests and areas of expertise include early church studies, the history of exegesis, mission work, and African Christianity.

I have a Catholic friend who recently quipped that perhaps the Catholic Church should get back into the business of selling indulgences so that the church could be more favorably regulated . . . as a business. Developments here in the United States and around the globe are testing the borders between the church and the state. Some see this as part of a larger pattern of animus against churches. Coronavirus

restrictions on churches is the most recent issue; in some cases churches were being treated differently than other entities such as restaurants or big box stores. In some places, churches were forbidden from having in-person worship services. Churches adapted with online services and other “virtual” care. Pastors continue to experience pressure from some parishioners who think that (1) the pastor is too subservient to government restrictions and guidelines; and (2) the pastor is not strict enough and is endangering lives. The government continues to mandate restrictions and parishioners and public alike are chafing at the regulations while also chomping at the bit for a bit of normalcy. What are we to do? To think?

Not surprisingly, Luther has both positive and negative things to say about the government's role in the lives of its citizens and in the church. In what follows I would like to explore Luther's view of temporal authority and how it relates to Christian freedom and our churches. This paper does not deal with religious freedom as we in the West understand it today. The idea of religious pluralism and the freedom

to believe whatever you want would be foreign to Luther's world. He was, however, very much concerned about the temporal authority's—and the Roman Catholic Church's—overreach into the realm of the conscience and the soul. And he was equally concerned that government be honored for what it has been ordained by God to do.

Luther, Christian Freedom, and Temporal Authority

Luther treated the issue of temporal authority in a number of his earlier works, speaking favorably of the role of government in keeping order and guarding against civil unrest, insurrection, and rebellion—something our own US government has been dealing with more and more as of late.¹ But he was also concerned about government overstepping its bounds when it came to the freedom of the Christian. In his 1520 treatise titled *On the Freedom of the Christian*, or, as the Latin text reads, *On Christian Liberty*, Luther put forward the assertion that “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.”² This is music to American Christian ears. On the surface, it would seem to champion the idea that my freedom, my individuality trumps everything else. Nobody can tell me what to do. We are perfectly free captains of our manifest destiny. But Luther quickly clarifies what this freedom actually is.

Those familiar with Luther's biography know that he struggled with how he could appease a wrathful God. All of the mechanisms within the church of his day, whether the sacraments or the practice of personal piety, were all geared toward some type of negotiated agreement with God, where God does his part and we do our part. The problem for Luther was that he could never fully and consistently do his part. In his 1520 *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* Luther deconstructed many of the popular pieties and mechanisms that had been promoted for making oneself right with God. He realized that these were simply accomplishing the captivity of Christian freedom.³ There was no way one could be certain that the will and the soul would be truly free if the onus was on us. Luther was seeking certainty and assurance that God was on his side and had his back. Only when he was certain of this, with full assurance placed on God's acts and his redemption, could Luther consider himself as a truly free Christian.

This is the light in which his proposition regarding Christian freedom needs to be read. This proposition speaks about the inner freedom of the soul that has been set free through the word and promise of Christ in the gospel. This inner freedom is not influenced or affected by any outward, external factor except the “most holy word of God, the gospel of Christ.”⁴ He insists in another earlier 1520 document that no pope, bishop or any person “has the right to impose a single syllable of law upon a Christian man without his consent; if he does, it is done in the spirit of tyranny. . . . I left my voice simply on behalf of liberty and conscience, and I confidently cry: No law, whether of men or of angels, may rightfully be imposed upon Christians without

their consent, for we are free of all laws.”⁵ American Christians today hear these words and see Luther as their champion for free speech and freedom from oppressive authority, as did many of the peasants in his own day, as we shall see below. And perhaps he was—up to a point, but not in the way one might think.⁶

Luther laid down a principle that captures the essence of gospel freedom that may have echoes, albeit not direct parallels, in the contemporary discussion on religious freedom: No one has authority over the soul and the inner spiritual life of an individual but God. The temporal government exercises no authority in this realm—nor does a coercive church. The conscience is free from accusation because it relies on the person and word of Christ, not on our own struggles to become right with God. “The word is the gospel of God concerning his Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies. To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching. Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the word of God.”⁷ By faith in the promises of God we are free from sin, Satan and death itself because the Son has freed us. And if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed (Jn 8:36).

True Christian freedom, then, is a conscience not bound by accusations and not bound by rites, ceremonies, and laws that would bind. But it is also confidence in the Creator of the universe who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven to free us from the bondage of sin. That complete dependence on him, rather than on ourselves and our fulfilling his law, is what is truly liberating. At the heart and core of this freedom is the conscience which has its security in its Creator and his promise, and nowhere else. Sixteenth-century society was structured around two poles of authority: the church and temporal authority. Luther, in a sense, upset this polarity by allowing neither of them control over the inner man, the soul, or the conscience, which especially the church had been able to exploit in the spiritual extortion it exerted over Christian lives.⁸

The Christian should not be forced to act against his conscience. But this does not mean there may not be consequences for the individual who stands his ground, as Luther himself found out at the Diet of Worms the next year in 1521. Nor, however, does it make such a person an island unto himself or give him license to disregard the needs of his neighbor. The second proposition that Luther proposed in *The Freedom of the Christian* was that “a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”⁹ The inner freedom that the individual has in the inner man comes with a commitment to use that freedom in service to others. Luther quotes 1 Corinthians 9:19, “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all.” He points us to the prime example of Christ who was Lord of all and yet chose to be a servant for all (Phil 2:6–7). Luther, of course, is addressing the freedom of the Christian. Luther’s hope was that the rulers would also see themselves as servants and that Christians themselves would rally in support of serving one another and their neighbors.

The rulers in the church and in the secular government of Luther's day were seeking to extend their realm into areas where they did not belong.

Unfortunately, the rulers in the church and in the secular government of Luther's day were seeking to extend their realm into areas where they did not belong. While initially Luther had been in favor of the Saxon princes getting involved in helping to institute the ecclesiastical reforms he had been calling for,¹⁰ he later came to regret that decision as Catholic princes began meddling in the affairs

of the church even more boldly than the popes had done.¹¹ This meddling occasioned a treatise in 1523 entitled on *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should be Obeyed*.¹² In this treatise, Luther says that these rulers sometimes seek to extend their realm into the kingdom of the conscience under the guise of simply being "obedient Christian princes," when in reality they are simply trying to hide the fact that they are "scoundrels"¹³ hiding behind the mask of Christian pretense as they seek to bind consciences. Duke George, for instance, repeating previous prohibitions, expressly had forbidden people from reading Luther's writings in a proclamation dated November 7, 1522. "They are thereby presumptuously setting themselves in God's place, lording it over men's consciences and faith, and schooling the Holy Spirit according to their own harebrained ideas."¹⁴ Because Luther sees these lords and princes acting in this way—suppressing the Christian faith, denying the word of God, binding consciences, blaspheming the name of God—he can no longer remain silent. They must be resisted. The form of resistance he chooses is not insurrection, however, but "words."¹⁵

His words take the form of a three-fold outline in which he first upholds the divine origin of temporal authority, then speaks to the limits of temporal authority, and concludes with some pastoral advice for rulers on how they should exercise power.

Government Is Ordained by God

It is important for Luther in the first part of his treatise to establish the divine origin of temporal authority in order to show government's proper role. The fact that civil government is ordained by God's will and ordinance is established by Luther on the basis of Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2.¹⁶ He further notes that the law of the temporal sword has existed since the beginning, hearkening back to the time when Cain murdered his brother Abel. "Hence, it is certain and clear enough that it is God's will that the temporal sword and law be used for the punishment of the wicked and the protection of the upright."¹⁷ This temporal authority belongs to what Luther refers to as the kingdom of the world (*Reich der Welt*).¹⁸ This kingdom is to be held

distinct from the kingdom of God (*Reich Gottes*), another term that he uses.¹⁹ In using the language of kingdoms, we should note here that Luther had at least three “two kingdoms” concepts that he used over the years. He rarely if ever uses it to refer to church and state relations as we do in America today. In the present document, he is using the terms to refer to the two spheres or dimensions of life in which God rules and Satan tries to subvert his rule. The kingdom of God refers to the vertical dimension of life and the Christian’s relationship with God. The kingdom of the world refers to the horizontal dimension of life and the Christian’s relationship that we have with the rest of creation.²⁰ All true believers who are in Christ and under Christ belong to the kingdom of God and are under his kingly rule, the rule of the gospel. They have no need of temporal law or sword.

Unfortunately, the world is filled with those who do not believe in Christ and are not true Christians, who in fact are lawless and need their sinful desires to be held in check. God has “provided for them a different government beyond the Christian estate and kingdom of God,”²¹ in order to restrain evil. Otherwise, if the law of human nature were allowed to prevail without any temporal authority to keep it in check, human beings would prey on each other and take advantage of one another without any fear of retribution. Within the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God, God has ordained two ways of governing (*zwei Regimente*) in these kingdoms (*Reiche*). One is the spiritual government, “by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ”; the other is the worldly (*weltliche*) or temporal government, “which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that—no thanks to them—they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace.”²² He has no illusions about having an evangelical Christian government. This would only work, he says, if you “first fill the world with real Christians. . . . This you will never accomplish; for the world and the masses are and always will be un-Christian, even if they are all baptized and Christian in name. Christians are few and far between (as the saying is).”²³ Christian government is not the answer because the wicked always outnumber the good. Even if the government operated according to the Christian way of doing things with love for the neighbor as the chief motivator, sheep do not survive long around wolves and lions, unless there is an outside force to govern and keep the peace.

What is a Christian to do in such an environment? “At one and the same time you satisfy God’s kingdom inwardly and the kingdom of the world outwardly. You suffer evil and injustice, and yet at the same time you punish evil and injustice; you do not resist evil, and yet at the same time, you do resist it. In the one case, you consider your neighbor and what is his. In what concerns you and yours, you govern yourself by the gospel and suffer injustice toward yourself as a true Christian; in what concerns the person or property of others, you govern yourself according to love and tolerate no injustice toward your neighbor.”²⁴ Luther seems to be saying that if

government oppression only affects you, you suffer the injustice as a true Christian, no matter how painful or detrimental it is to your own welfare. If, however, the oppression also affects your neighbor then you are not only free to resist, but are obligated to oppose such injustice. The freedom of the Christian he had espoused three years earlier is still freedom in service to the neighbor without regard to one's own welfare. Government too is God's servant, meant to help and serve the neighbor, even if it does not always do so.²⁵

The Limits of Governmental Authority

Now that he has spelled out God's different ways of ruling (*Regimente*) in both kingdoms (*Reiche*), he moves to the second section of his treatise where he spells out the limits of authority for each kingdom. The soul is squarely in the domain of the kingdom of God in that vertical dimension where the kingdom of the world has no say. The gospel governs the kingdom of God under Christ. Its laws do indeed extend to the spiritual condition of humanity, the soul, and the conscience; but this is as far as its rule is to extend. It does not extend into the kingdom of the world except to the extent that Christians are called to serve one another and the world in what they say and do. By the same token, the kingdom of the world, "has laws which extend no further than to life and property and external affairs on earth, for God cannot and will not permit anyone but himself to rule over the soul. Therefore, where the temporal authority presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God's government and only misleads souls and destroys them."²⁶

Commenting on Matthew 22:21, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's," Luther notes that Christ is here making a distinction as to how far Caesar's kingdom extends. "The soul is not under the authority of Caesar; he can neither teach it nor guide it, neither kill it nor give it life, nether bind it nor loose it, neither judge it nor condemn it, neither hold it fast nor release it."²⁷ The government cannot compel faith or bind the conscience even if some citizens would give it permission to do so—cancel culture if you will, a topic for another day.²⁸

It is futile and impossible to command or compel anyone by force to believe this or that. . . . Furthermore, every man runs his own risk in believing as he does, and he must see to it himself that he believes rightly. . . . How he believes or disbelieves is a matter for the conscience of each individual, and since this takes nothing away from the temporal authority the latter should be content to attend to its own affairs and let men believe this or that as they are able and willing, and constrain no one by force. . . . No matter how harshly they lay down the law, or how violently they rage, they can do no

more than force an outward compliance of the mouth and the hand; the heart they cannot compel, though they work themselves to a frazzle. For the proverb is true: "Thoughts are tax-free."²⁹

For those who would quote Romans 13:1 and 1 Peter 2:13 as proof that we should obey government in all things, Luther would respond that obedience to temporal authority applies only to external things and not to matters of the heart or conscience. Paul limits the government's authority in Romans 13:3 to restraining evil,³⁰ and in Romans 13:7 to external things like taxes, revenue, honor, and respect. Luther saw a positive role for government too in promoting the welfare of the people it governs. But in this section of his treatise on the limits of temporal authority Luther is focused on where government has overstepped its limits. He refers to "the common saying found also in Augustine, 'No one can or ought to be forced to believe.'"³¹ No one but God has any authority over the conscience or over the word of God. "Thereby, [Peter] clearly sets a limit to the temporal authority, for if we had to do everything that the temporal authority wanted there would have been no point in saying, 'We must obey God rather than men' [Acts 5:39]." Human rules and regulations "cannot possibly extend [their] authority into heaven or over souls."³² They can make it harder to live out one's faith, values or beliefs, as Luther himself found out, but the only power to change hearts and minds, he held, resided in words and the word.³³

*Government does indeed
have a proper role in
helping churches manage
their temporal affairs,
and both must advocate
for the poor and the
disadvantaged.*

This does not mean that government has nothing to say to churches. Temporal rulers govern ecclesiastical institutions in matters that concern public safety and protection of the church and its members, just as it is in the kingdom of the world. In our modern day, this covers such issues as the seating capacity of a church building governed by fire and building codes that concern safety and health, for instance. The clergy sex-abuse scandal is another example, as are the temporal rules governing marriage. Government does indeed have a proper role in helping churches manage their temporal affairs, and both church and government can and must advocate for the poor, the elderly, widows, orphans, and the disadvantaged. In fact, in his *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility* (1520) he advocated for an organized system of care for the poor which should be set up in every city. He also had a hand in getting the Leisnig ordinance of 1523 drawn up in order to provide

public funds for education, social welfare, and healthcare for the sick and elderly in the community.³⁴ We will see further regard for government's positive contribution for healthcare below in his treatise about the plague of 1527.

Rigid Separation vs. Distinction of the Two Kingdoms

In the third section of the present treatise under discussion, Luther notes that while the temporal authority should realize its limits, the kingdom of Christ should not unnecessarily limit its influence of the temporal authority. Discussing what to do with rulers who did not have the requisite wisdom to govern, his reply was that there is no easy law one can lay down that a prince would follow in governing his people. Rather the ruler's heart and mind need to be instructed on what his attitude should be toward all laws, counsels, judgments and actions.³⁵ That instruction is best done by those whose task it is to govern the heart and mind (i.e., those in the spiritual kingdom). But this assumes that the ruler is a Christian, which Luther says is rare. And so, the two spheres are not to remain so separate that the spiritual kingdom does not have any influence over the temporal rulers. But the spiritual kingdom must not overstep its bounds in doing things reserved for the temporal kingdom either, and vice versa.

A summary of the "sum and substance" of Luther's understanding of the two kingdoms or governments is found in his *Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved* (1536).³⁶

God has established two kinds of government among men. The one is spiritual; it has no sword, but has the Word, by means of which men are to become good and righteous, so that with this righteousness they may attain everlasting life. He administers this righteousness through the Word, which He has committed to the preachers. The other kind is worldly government, which works through the sword so that those who do not want to be good and righteous to eternal life may be forced to become good and righteous in the eyes of the world. He administers this righteousness through the sword. And although God will not reward this kind of righteousness with eternal life, nonetheless, He still wishes peace to be maintained among men and rewards them with temporal blessing. . . . God himself is the founder, lord, master, protector, and rewarder of both kinds of righteousness.³⁷

In other words, God rules in both realms, but through different means. The word of God is the modus operandi in the kingdom of God; the sword is his modus operandi in the kingdom of the world. Luther in his own day saw what a misunderstanding of the distinction between the two kingdoms and especially of his views on Christian freedom could do. At the instigation of Thomas Müntzer, the

peasants revolted against the German nobility in 1525, two years after Luther had written his treatise on temporal authority. They burned and destroyed the castles of the German princes, stormed the convents, and renounced obedience to their lords and the magistrates.³⁸ Granted, the peasant's conditions were deplorable, and they had been taken advantage of by the nobles and the church in countless ways. In reality, they were little more than slaves. Hadn't Luther himself urged freedom from slavery to the pope and the nobles, and championed freedom of conscience? They had taken his words regarding Christian freedom and extended them into the political realm seeking freedom there too as they presented a bill of rights to the German noblemen, asking for redress for the oppression they had suffered at their hands. Their requests seem quite reasonable by today's standards in the West. The princes didn't think so. Estimates are that they slaughtered up to 100,000 peasants, putting the revolt down and quelling the unrest.³⁹

Luther was appalled by the slaughter, but also believed the nobleman were within their rights in putting down sedition and rebellion. Luther himself clarified in any number of places, including even ten years later in his 1535 Galatians commentary that the freedom to which he was referring was not political freedom but freedom in the spiritual realm of the gospel. Luther makes clear in his *Galatians Commentary* (1535)—which is suffused with statements about freedom—that “the freedom with which Christ has set us free [is] not from some human slavery or tyrannical authority but from the eternal wrath of God. Where? In the conscience. This is where our freedom comes to a halt; it goes no further. For Christ has set us free, not for a political freedom or a freedom of the flesh but for a theological or spiritual freedom, that is, to make our conscience free and joyful, unafraid of the wrath to come (Mt 3:7). This is the most genuine freedom; it is immeasurable.”⁴⁰ While we may wish that Luther had spoken more forcefully on behalf of the peasants, his was a different world than today's.

Government Responsibility in Times of Plague

As noted above, neither Christians or non-Christians, nor those in government should attribute to temporal authority and to the kingdom of the world more than they can deliver, or were designed to deliver, or are capable of delivering. But government should also be recognized for what it can do. God ordained the temporal authority to restrain evil, protect its citizens and ensure tranquility. It is due respect and honor because God has ordained it to offer assistance in caring for its citizens as it restrains the evil they may encounter as citizens.

Luther understood this acutely during the plague that had visited Wittenberg in the fall of 1527. John the Steadfast, a prince who was in support of Luther, put in place a series of orders to try and combat the plague. The first thing he did was order the faculty of Wittenberg, including Luther, to go to another city—but Luther

refused to leave. He, his friends, and his pastor Johannes Bugenhagen stayed behind in Wittenberg to take care of the sick and the dying, which they did by continuing to preach and teach, by administering the sacraments, but also by visiting the sick in their homes and providing for other needs as they arose. He even turned his own house into a hospital of sorts, although surely his wife Katy was in charge more than he was.

Once the plague mercifully died down later that year—and so there is hope for us—there was plenty of blame to go around. The Catholics accused the Lutherans of abandoning their flock at a time of critical need, which of course Luther hadn't done, but others had. Luther's own friends in the church and government accused him of being reckless in ignoring the Elector John's orders. Pretty much he was damned if he did, and damned if he didn't—which is how a lot of us feel when confronted with decisions for which there is no good or perfect decision, especially these days. A pastor in Breslau named Johann Hess asked Luther if it was all right for some Christians to flee when confronted with the plague. Luther responded with an open letter titled, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague."⁴¹ His answer: If you were a first responder, which for him included doctors, nurses, political leaders, and pastors, then you should not flee. You needed to stick around to serve where you were needed. He used as an example Jesus's words in John 10:11 "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep; while the hired hand flees at the first sign of the wolf" (to paraphrase).⁴² Where and when you were needed, you stayed.

For those who were not first responders, Luther seemed to allow more leeway, guided by common sense and one's conscience. He cited the examples from Scripture where there were times when it was better to flee: Moses fled from Pharaoh, Jacob fled from Esau, David fled from Saul. There were other examples as well. But you do not flee when the law of love compels you to help your neighbors when they are in need. As he put it, "These are the ones to whom Christ will say, 'I was sick and you did not visit me'" (Mt 25:43).⁴³ But Luther was also not against asking for help when there were others who could help out, such as with municipal homes and hospitals staffed to take care of the sick:

It would be well, where there is an efficient government in cities and states, to maintain municipal homes and hospitals staffed with people to take care of the sick so that patients from private homes can be sent there. . . . That would indeed be a fine, commendable, and Christian arrangement to which everyone should offer generous help and contributions, particularly the government. Where there are no such institutions—and they exist only in a few places—we must give hospital care and be nurses for one another in any extremity or risk the loss of salvation and the grace of God.⁴⁴

Most of Luther's concern was with those who abandoned their vocation in not serving their neighbor. But he also had words of warning for those who, as he put it, were tempting God during these times of crisis and misusing their "freedom." He describes these as people who

are much too rash and reckless, tempting God and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague. They disdain the use of medicines; they do not avoid places and persons infected by the plague, but lightheartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are. They say that it is God's punishment; if he wants to protect them he can do so without medicines or our carefulness. That is not trusting God but tempting him. . . .

No, my dear friends, that is no good. Use medicine; take potions which can help you; fumigate house, yard, and street; shun persons and places where your neighbor does not need your presence or has recovered, and act like a man who wants to help put out the burning city. What else is the epidemic but a fire which instead of consuming wood and straw devours life and body? You ought to think this way: "Very well, by God's decree the enemy has sent us poison and deadly pestilence. Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid persons and places where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me, and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely. . . . This is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God."⁴⁵

Luther was never one to pull punches. But he also recognized that not everyone is at the same place in their faith. Don't burden a conscience that is truly at a loss for what to do or feels the need to flee. He does offer some suggestions that sound very twenty-first century. We should visit people when they are sick, but also do the things that will stop the spread of the virus. Fumigating our homes and churches, avoiding places where our presence is not needed, in order not to become contaminated and infect others through our negligence. Those are pretty powerful words. But he's also realistic about the risks: "If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me." You can run,

I'm not sure what Luther would have done with online worship or Zoom meetings, although I think he would have found a way to get out of the latter.

whatever they please.”⁴⁷ Their subjects, in turn, “make the mistake of believing that they, in turn, are bound to obey their rulers in everything.”⁴⁸ He often excoriated the government for its failure to provide an effective social safety net for its subjects. The poor, the widows, and the orphans were often taken advantage of by courtiers who also cheated on their taxes and manipulated finances in their favor.⁴⁹ While we see his concern for obeying the government in protecting Wittenberg from the virus, one wonders what he would have done had the government prohibited the church from meeting for worship altogether. In his treatise on the plague discussed just above, Luther says it is the duty of the Christian “to attend church and listen to the sermon so that they learn through God’s word how to live and how to die.” They should also “get ready for death by going to confession and taking the sacrament once every week or fortnight.”⁵⁰ He would hardly have let the secular realm take that away from him or his parishioners. But I do think he would have understood the cleaning, the social distancing, and mask wearing requirements as things done in service to one’s neighbor. I’m not sure what Luther would have done with online worship or Zoom meetings, although I think he would have found a way to get out of the latter.

Conclusion

Both rulers and their subjects need to know that there are limits to temporal authority, and what those limits are. Rulers in Luther’s day were demanding that people conform to whatever the ruler prescribed. Similar demands are being placed on churches today with the assumption that these political leaders know better. Others would make an appeal to the common humanity we share as the guarantee of caring for one another with people voluntarily wearing masks and practicing physical distancing because “we’re all in this together.” One must ask, however, why an appeal would be made to human nature for safeguarding humanity when human nature’s record is less than stellar. Luther is not sanguine, but rather pessimistic about human nature’s ability to act virtuously or in anyone’s best interest but its own, apart

but you can’t hide from God. Just ask Adam and Eve. But until he’s ready to take me I should do what I can to serve my neighbor. This is the law of love. Governments cannot love⁴⁶ but they can help us in serving our neighbor.

Luther also had some rather harsh words for government, most of which were in his earlier works. For instance, he takes issue with rulers who “actually think they can do—and order their subjects to do—

from coercion. Human beings in the kingdom of the world all too naturally resort to tyranny and corruption, as base human desires war with our better selves and usually triumph. Left to itself, “human desire is too fickle to be a reliable guarantee for honoring one another; for that we need acknowledgment of a common Creator and Judge.” Absent that, our only alternative is the sometimes blunt instrument of government which has been ordained by God for our good.

My Catholic friend’s quip about the church taking up the sale of indulgences again to get on a fairer playing field was meant to be ironic. But it also touches a nerve. There is an implicit, sometimes explicit, bias against anything in our society today that does not promote or have inherent economic value or political value. It would seem quaint today to many outside the church that Luther saw pastors as essential workers during the pandemic. We in the church need to be realistic that our world is not Luther’s world—and there are good reasons to be glad about that, not least of which is having indoor plumbing. That Luther challenged the overreach of the government and church was itself a game-changer. That he didn’t go as far as some today think he should have shows that he was a product of his time. He, nonetheless, can provide us with some guidance for our present circumstances.

What are the practical implications for us today? I will state these more generally, since there is honest disagreement on the specifics of many issues we are facing today. Also, this is not meant to be an exhaustive list but simply reflective of what came up in this paper. (1) The state has a role in ensuring the safety of all citizens, whether inside or outside of a church building. These regulations are meant to protect us, as Luther would say, from the law of sinful human nature which is always most interested in self-interest and preservation, even in the church. (2) The church, of course, should be just as concerned about its parishioners’ safety as the state is, since the Christian is not only “a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none” but also “a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” (3) The state cannot coerce the conscience or the soul since the soul and conscience reside in God’s kingdom. When the state oversteps its bounds in terms of marriage, gender issues, sanctity of life, and so on, Christians must resist and seek to protect their neighbor, especially the most vulnerable among us, albeit with words and the word and not with force. (4) Christian freedom is a gift from God that is part and parcel of the kingdom of God; temporal authority in the kingdom of the world is also a gift from God. But only one of these gifts is truly enduring. May God help us to know the difference.

Endnotes

- 1 Luther had treated the issue earlier in his *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility* (1520) and in *A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard against Insurrection and Rebellion* (1522).
- 2 *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520) in *Luther's Works* [hereafter *LW*], Vol. 31:344.
- 3 <https://concordiatheology.org/2021/01/icymi-robert-kolb-on-christian-freedom/>.
- 4 *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 345.
- 5 *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) in *LW* 36:70, 72.
- 6 As the note in the annotated Luther clarifies, the word liberty had gained “a new meaning and usage in the Middle Ages, especially in the context of feudal society. Whereas Christian liberty was expressed as freedom from the bondage of sin and death in order to be a servant of Christ (e.g., Rom. 6:6f.; Gal. 5:1; 1 Cor. 7:22f.), liberty in the feudal system indicated one’s possession of power and jurisdiction—usually over property—without external coercion or limits. Thus, granting a liberty was to grant a privilege. Clergy already began receiving such liberties in the age of Constantine, but as the church participated in the emerging feudal system as a landowner, the notion of “ecclesiastical liberty” had more to do with political and economic jurisdiction than liberty in a spiritual or theological sense. Luther is exploiting this irony in his comments here. Luther would set forth a very different sense of “freedom” in his subsequent treatise, *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520). Erik Herrmann, Paul Robinson, eds., *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520): *The Annotated Luther, Study Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 73.
- 7 *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 346.
- 8 See also Luther’s extended discussion on Christian freedom throughout his *Commentary on Galatians* (1535) in *LW* 26 and 27.
- 9 *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 344.
- 10 Steven Ozment, “Martin Luther on Religious Liberty,” in Noel B. Reynolds, W. Cole Durham, Jr. *Religious Liberty in Western Thought*, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003) (earlier published by Emory University: Scholars Press, 1996), 81.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *On Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should be Obedied* (1523) in *LW* 45:81–129.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 14 *Ibid.* See endnote no. 11.
- 15 *On Temporal Authority*, 85.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 85–86.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 87. Luther includes numerous other references in both the Old and New Testament that further buttress his argument, but are omitted here due to space considerations.
- 18 The primary categories of distinction that Luther uses in this treatise are the “kingdom of the world” and the “kingdom of God.” By “kingdom of the world” he means things that have nothing to do with the spiritual realm of life. He is not saying that God does not rule in this realm. He understands, rather, that God rules differently in this realm, often through means of coercion by the civil authorities when other persuasion does not work. The “kingdom of God” pertains only to the spiritual realm of the soul and the conscience of the Christian, which are not to be governed by coercion but by the word of God and the gospel. See the article on “The Distinction of Two Kingdoms and Two Realms” by Robert Kolb in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, eds. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel and L’Urbormir Batka (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 178–179.
- 19 *On Temporal Authority*, 88.
- 20 See Robert Kolb’s article on “Luther’s Hermeneutics of Distinction” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 178–179, section III, titled, “The Distinction of Two Kingdoms, Two Realms.”
- 21 *On Temporal Authority*, 90.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 91.

- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid., 96.
- 25 Ibid., 99–100.
- 26 Ibid., 91.
- 27 Ibid., 111.
- 28 My comment, not Luther’s, although I think he would agree.
- 29 *On Temporal Authority*, 107–108.
- 30 Ibid. “The governing authority is not a terror to good conduct but to bad.”
- 31 *On Temporal Authority*, 108. According to the footnote, this comes from Augustine, *Contra litteras Petiliani*, II, 184; *Patrologia Latina* 43:315. He no doubt is thinking about Augustine’s concern that no one should be forced to believe in the gospel, something Augustine himself conveniently forgot when dealing with the Donatists, however. Unfortunately, Augustine is known elsewhere for his own unfavorable treatment of the Donatists with his infamous phrase “compel them to come in” found in a number of his anti-Donatist writings, such as his letter 93, to Vincentius par. 5–8, 16–17 and his letter 173 to Donatus, et.al.
- 32 *On Temporal Authority*, 111.
- 33 *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 345; *On Temporal Authority*, 85.
- 34 See The LCMS World Relief and Human Care booklet “Ordinance of a Common Chest” by Martin Luther, trans. Albert Steinhaeuser, rev. Walther Brandt (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2005, rep. 2019).
- 35 *On Temporal Authority*, 119.
- 36 *Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved* (1526) in *LW* 46:93–137.
- 37 Ibid., 99–100.
- 38 S. S. Schmucker, *A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians by Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Smith, English, 1860), 52.
- 39 Brett Muhlhahn, *Being Shaped by Freedom. An Examination of Luther’s Development of Christian Liberty, 1520–1525* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012) distinguishes Luther’s “personal-social” approach to public problems in the *Invocavit* sermons. In these sermons written in 1522, Luther is sticking up for the weak and troubled individual conscience which must be distinguished from the “official-social” concern that moved him to call on the restoration of public order in a time in which it was feared that chaos would flood the Empire. The fear, as Robert Kolb pointed out to me, was justified since there had been over 100 peasant revolts between 1500 and 1524.
- 40 *Commentary on Galatians* (1535) in *LW* 27:4.
- 41 *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague* (1527) in *LW* 43:119–138.
- 42 Ibid., 121.
- 43 Ibid., 122.
- 44 Ibid., 126–127.
- 45 Ibid., 131–132.
- 46 I am indebted to Lamin Sanneh for this phrase which he often uses in lectures and in our conversations together.
- 47 *On Temporal Authority*, 83.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid., 84.
- 50 *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague*, 134.
- 51 *On Temporal Authority*, 83–84.
- 52 Rather than “social distancing” since the last thing we want to be is socially distanced from one another. Physical distance, on the other hand, has been shown to be quite salutary in helping not spread the virus.
- 53 Lamin Sanneh, *Christianity, Politics, and Citizenship with Reference to Africa: A Comparative Inquiry* (Paper delivered during the Lausanne Conference at Cape Town, South Africa, October 21), 41–42.

Luther's Small Catechism Explained Joachim Mörlin's Catechetical Exercises in Definition

Robert Kolb



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When Joachim Mörlin opened his copy of Martin Luther's Small Catechism, he pictured Luther as a "godly little bee who had drawn forth noble saving honey from all the roses and lovely flowers of God's paradise" as he poured the sweetness of God's word into the vessel that took form as a catechism.

Mörlin explained to his patron, Duchess Elizabeth of Brandenburg, duchess of Braunschweig-Calenberg, that Luther had transferred the Bible into his Small Catechism. Mörlin had the impression that "the Holy Spirit was guiding his hand and pen apart from any human ideas, for there is not a single word, no syllable or letter, in it that does not lead to lofty thoughts from which I can learn something every day. Yet I remain unfortunately still a poor, simple schoolboy." Mörlin wanted to remain a simple preacher of the catechism because "what can be preached if not the simple proclamation of the catechism?" Luther's Small Catechism provided the milk that the congregation needed to hear. It "makes Christians and produces one miracle after another."¹ As exaggerated as Mörlin's estimate sounds, it conveys the impression made upon those who studied under Luther or found a new way of thinking and living as a believer under the impact of the first years of the Wittenberg Reformation.² Mörlin's guide to Luther's catechism distinguished itself not only as the early trendsetter among the attempts of Luther's students to provide aids for the use of the Small Catechism. It also caught the reformer's pedagogical intent by cultivating its use as a handbook for the entire Christian life.

During his stay in Wittenberg, whither he came in 1532 to study, Mörlin

Mörlin's guide to Luther's catechism caught the reformer's pedagogical intent by cultivating its use as a handbook for the entire Christian life.

served as a deacon at the town church alongside Luther and the congregation's pastor, Johannes Bugenhagen. He was returning to his hometown, where he was born in 1514, son of an arts instructor at the university, who left Wittenberg in 1521 to become a parish pastor. The younger Mörlin, as son of a former colleague, entered into the inner circle of students around

Luther, Bugenhagen, and Philip Melancthon. In 1540 he took a call, with Luther's recommendation and doctorate in hand, to serve as pastor and ecclesiastical superintendent in Arnstadt. There he first penned his expansion of Luther's catechism. Ousted by the city council for criticizing his patron, Count Günther of Schwarzburg, for executing a man for stealing fish, he was called to the ecclesiastical superintendent's office in Göttingen. In 1548 Duke Erich II of Braunschweig-Calenberg-Göttingen removed him from that office because of his opposition to the Augsburg Interim, which the apostate prince was promoting. Pastorates in Königsberg and Braunschweig followed before he returned to Königsberg as bishop of Samland in 1568. In Braunschweig he had issued a revised version of his explanation to Luther's catechism. In the 1550s and 1560s Mörlin became a leading voice among the so-called Gnesio-Lutherans, and his formulations helped shape the theology of the Formula of Concord.³

In preparing a guide for using Luther's Catechism Mörlin was not trespassing on sacred ground: Luther himself had called for such expositions and elaborations of his own catechetical efforts. In the preface to the Small Catechism, Luther instructed users, "After you have taught the people a short catechism like this one, then take up a longer catechism and impart to them a richer and fuller understanding. Using such a catechism, explain each individual commandment, petition, or part with its various works, benefits and blessings, harm and danger, as you find treated at length in so many booklets."⁴ Johann Spangenberg, the reformer of Nordhausen, had already composed his exposition of the Large Catechism to aid parents, teachers, and pastors in the instruction of children.⁵ Others followed with their own elucidations and applications of the Small Catechism.⁶

Luther had transformed the medieval catechism as a program for instruction in preparation for going to a priest for the confession of sins that constituted a key to the sacrament of penance. He transformed "catechism" into a program for instruction of children in the Christian life. He laid the basis for daily living by explaining the core of the late medieval catechism—the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten

Commandments. He then followed this with brief guidelines for the practice of this faith to his “heavenly realm” or dimension of daily life, by modeling a devotional life of meditation on God’s word and prayer. He also added biblical quotations guiding Christians in God’s “earthly realm,” by sketching the life of new obedience within the structures and callings of daily life in the household, with its family and economic responsibilities, in the political and societal callings, and in church with its responsibilities.⁷ Mörlin’s exposition of the Small Catechism reflects his mentor’s perception of Christian instruction as training for living the Christian life. Mörlin ardently defended Luther’s teaching on the person of Christ, the atonement, the sacraments, and other disputed issues throughout his career. However, in contrast to some of his contemporaries who composed similar textbooks to aid in the use of the Small Catechism, his commentary on the Small Catechism recognized its intended application as a handbook for Christian living. This is especially clear in his treatment of the Ten Commandments and the “Household Chart” of Christian callings.

Before he began his examination of the language of the Catechism’s text, Mörlin laid out his understanding of the framework of the catechetical task and what “catechism” delivers. In 1547 he began with the question, “tell me, dear child, what is the reason that you can proudly claim to be a Christian?” The child confesses that God had made him “a child and heir of eternal life because of Christ, his Son.” The child then explains that Christ alone is the object of her trust, the basis of entering into the heavenly kingdom of the Father and living there eternally. “What is his kingdom?” “It is the gracious proclamation of his word,” which Mörlin explained immediately as “the teaching and preaching of repentance and forgiveness of sin.” The catechism is simply brief instruction in the chief articles or “parts” of this teaching, namely law and gospel.⁸

Later editions substituted for this introduction questions beginning with one similar to that of Zacharias Ursinus in the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?”⁹ Ursinus had studied in Wittenberg, albeit after Mörlin had left, but the Reformed theologian used Luther’s text in various parts of his catechism. The relationship between Ursinus’s and Mörlin’s texts must remain a matter of speculation. Mörlin asked, “What is your comfort in the face of all this world on earth?” His answer: “Although I know that I am really by my character and by nature a child of wrath, like the entire world, Ephesians 2, I have in fact become another person, a Christian, in that I am baptized in Jesus Christ, my dear Savior, as a child, according to his command, Mark 10[:13–16]. And I place my entire hope and assurance on him with true trust and faith.” Mörlin asked, “What makes you be so assured of this comfort?” The children were to answer, “Fools know nothing of such spiritual matters, 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. But God has created this comfort from heaven in my heart through his holy divine Word,” citing John 6:19. Mörlin added, “What is God’s Word?” “It is nothing inborn in the human being but God’s

counsel, the thought and intention or favor of his heart, as he has revealed it from the beginning of the world through the prophets, Christ, and the apostles up until that time. He has had their message brought together in writing in the Bible for all who come later, Psalm 102[:19]. For that is a certain rule for eternity of the proper pure teaching against all false teaching and error, Romans 1[:1–4], Acts 24[:14–15] and 26[:22–23], Galatians 1[:8–9].”¹⁰

Mörlin’s revised version then followed with a slightly altered explanation of the word *catechism* as a brief instruction in the “chief parts” or articles of faith. It includes three parts: “the law, the gospel, the household charts [the table of Christian callings]. For God deals with us on earth in these three ways.” Mörlin elaborated, explaining its content in the way in which Luther had in his *Prayerbook* of 1522.¹¹ “First he shows us our sin, as a physician does pointing to our illness and injury, the mortal mishap, by which we should go to eternal ruin, where there is nothing to be done or aid to be found. God does this through the law. Second, our righteous God points those who recognize the injury, and whose heart rejects it and desires to be free and released from it, to the medicine of the teaching of faith, telling how we are to seek it each day in prayer and how we are to use and apply the precious sacraments [in daily life]. All this is in the gospel. Third, he prescribes for each individual a wonderful way of life, which we are to conduct each in our own walk of life that we may live in godly fashion and not fall from the faith into the old, sinful, evil poison and plague. He does that in the household chart [of Christian callings].”¹²

Mörlin’s catechism then proceeds with more explicit and detailed definitions of Luther’s terminology in the Small Catechism. Such definitions, along with numerous additional Bible passages to support these definitions, made up his aid to catechetical study. Practicing theology by definition of key terms was not unique to Mörlin in his generation. In his monumental hermeneutical work *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae* (1567), Matthias Flacius Illyricus set forth three methods for the practice of theology: the synthetic, the analytic, and the definition of terms, as the key to equipping the faithful to read the Bible and absorb its message. The *Clavis* puts the third of these to use in its first volume, a 700-folio page dictionary of biblical terms. Luther himself had set forth his framework for studying Scripture with definition of eight contrasting terms in his preface to the epistle to the Romans.¹³ Mörlin’s contemporary as a student in Wittenberg, Cyriacus Spangenberg, laid out five contrasting pairs of terms as a hermeneutical basis for his two-volume homiletical commentary on Romans.¹⁴ Mörlin practiced this method by carefully considering what the words Luther had used in his explanations in the Small Catechism meant to the children of his day. He was providing parents, schoolteachers, and pastors material for aiding children who wanted to know what the words they were learning from the Small Catechism meant. Instead of Luther’s simple “what is that?” [“was *ist* das?”] Mörlin asked for definition of the term [“was *heist* (the specific word)?”], a different phrase than Luther used in

asking what the significance of baptism is in his fourth question on the sacrament [“was *bedeut* denn solch Wasser teuffen?”].¹⁵

In 1547 Mörlin defined the “doctrine of the law” as “the ten commandments, in which God demands the perfect obedience of the heart, that we love him with all our strength and entire soul and disposition above all things and then love the neighbor, that is that we regard all poor, needy people to whom we can show love and favor as we regard ourselves. This is one part of the law. The other is the harsh warning in which God threatens his horrible fury and eternal wrath upon all who trespass against these commands. But he promises grace and every blessing to those who observe them. These commands do not give us a way of salvation but show us what is impossible for us.”¹⁶

Mörlin’s revision of the text employed more Bible verses, confirming his earlier defining the law as the Ten Commandments by citing Christ’s (Mt 5:21–38, 19:18–19, Lk 10:25–28) and Paul’s (Rom 2:22–23 and 7:7) references to the law as the Decalogue. He rejected Old Testament laws for Israel’s temporal government and its ceremonies; they did not constitute part of “the eternal law and unchangeable counsel and intention of God.” He added a question to confirm Luther’s first commandment orientation to God’s plan for human

living: “what is the intention of the law, what does it demand?” “Not only outward civil behavior, as secular law does, but it intends that our entire heart, the entire soul, our entire disposition be completely innocent and pure, without any bad behavior.”

This perfect obedience however lies beyond the sinner’s ability. Mörlin then defined sin as every impurity and

noxious attitude in the heart and inward nature as well as external transgressions of sin. He asked, “From where does sin come?” “From the inspiration and provocation of the wretched devil, who from the beginning led those in paradise astray and caused them to lose their innocence and purity of heart and all their powers and fell into sin.” Psalm 51:5 and Romans 5:12–14 show that all have inherited this inner horrible, evil way of thinking and outer gross sins. This earns us eternal, bitter death, eternal flames, in separation from God. This should bring us to remorse and repentance, to see Christ in the gospel.¹⁷

Mörlin’s way of augmenting what Luther had written followed his text with more explicit definitions. His treatment of the first and second commandments may illustrate this. He asks, “What does it mean to fear God?” Highlighting Luther’s emphasis on the personal relationship between God and the believer, Mörlin wrote,

Mörlin depicted strong emotional ties between the person of God and the human persons who bear his image.

“It really means not to flee from him, but to have him before our eyes all the time, acting like a child in humility, so we stand there with heartfelt concern that we not think, imagine or speak, act, or undertake anything that might make him sad or angry.” Likewise, Mörlin depicted strong emotional ties between the person of God and the human persons who bear his image. “What does it mean to love God?” “To regard him as the very highest good with all our hearts and thus with vigor and diligence do everything that we understand from his Word that will please him and not undertake anything with his Word and command.” “What does it mean to trust God?” “To attribute all good to him with enthusiasm, to place ourselves in his care with joyous certainty, and to be certain that he will never forsake us as he says in his Word, but he will always do good to us.” Mörlin was striving to convey that attitude toward God that he had heard cultivated in Luther’s lectures and that he read in the Large Catechism and other works of his mentor.

His exposition of the second commandment sought to foster an understanding of what the children were learning in Luther’s catechism to do with the name of the Lord. “What is cursing?” “It means to wish evil on others.” “What does swearing mean?” “To give testimony with God’s name without needing to or in other ways to make malicious remarks frivolously as ill-behaved soldiers do” (a reflection of the reputation of professional soldiers in a society with only professional military). Using satanic arts referred to “wanting to exercise special power over certain creatures apart from God’s order and command with his Word, to manipulate other people or do those around us special harm. Or, to manage the devil and seek comfort and aid from him, for instance, in a wise woman.” Lying means to tell something to others in a manner that misrepresents what it is or to be silent about the truth. Deceiving means not just reporting falsely but also to lead others on a false path.

Mörlin instead helped readers understand that calling on God’s name means crying to him for help and deliverance in need; praying means “desiring every kind of good from him and asking that we may use it according to his pleasure.” Praising him means “extolling his benefits, not being ashamed of him but freely confessing him to everyone around us.” Thanking him means “to demonstrate with words and deeds that he and everyone can hear that we recognize, love, and treasure his blessings.”¹⁸

With this treatment of the Decalogue, Mörlin laid down the basis for knowing why repentance is necessary and how to live the Christian life. This instruction for daily living reflects the affirmation of Melancthon’s “third use of the law” that Mörlin defended against fellow Gnesio-Lutherans who believed that the second use of the law was always accusing, that that use sufficiently informed believers of what they were to do even as they heard its accusing force, and that Melancthon’s term could easily foster a subtle kind of works-righteousness.¹⁹ Mörlin’s stance in that controversy reflected his concern in his catechism that his parishioners learn from childhood to live the life of faith in obedience to God’s plan for human life.

Mörlin's presentation of the "gospel" followed, in three parts, "the Creed, prayer, the precious sacraments."²⁰ His definitions explaining and applying the Creed reflects as well as his understanding of the theology that he had learned in Wittenberg. But not every term in Luther's explanations of the three articles of the Creed received thorough treatment as had the terminology relating to the law. His introduction of the three persons of the Trinity led to the question "did the Son deliver you apart from the Father?" a question that Luther had not addressed in either of his catechisms. Mörlin answered, "Certainly not; rather, what is revealed to me through one person in the one divine essence takes place by all three persons. Therefore, the one, eternal, true God delivers me in the person of the Son, who alone became human." Mörlin cited Acts 20:28, 1 Corinthians 2:8, John 5:17–18 and 14:9–11, and 1 John 5:20. "How can you understand such a matter?" "There is absolutely no way; it is a matter of faith." It is to be believed simply on the basis of God's revelation in his word, Mörlin asserted in the answer to the question "why do you believe that?"²¹ This question grows out of Mörlin's deep involvement in opposing Andreas Osiander's rejection of Luther's forensic doctrine of justification, and especially his critique of Osiander's redefinition of the believer's righteousness as the indwelling divine nature of Christ. This question represents his rejection of his Königsberg colleague Francesco Stancaró's critique of Osiander; Stancaró argued that only Christ's human nature saved sinners.²²

The next question introduced the discussion of the three articles "on creation, on deliverance, on sanctification." These topics are so divided to simplify the distinction of the three persons "of the Trinity and at the same time we acknowledge the highest, preeminent gifts and benefits of God and rely on him totally with our whole heart, in true faith." The first article, according to Mörlin, affirms that all creatures stem from the Creator alone. The pupil asked, "What about father and mother?" "They are nothing more than means through which God according to his good pleasure lets us be born on earth, in this valley of tears, and live." The next answer taught that God the Father gives "all that is necessary for this time and earthly sustenance richly and daily." The children naturally would answer, "Should a person not work?" "Well, of course, for God commanded work for Adam in his innocence, Genesis 2[:15]." With further Bible passages Mörlin reinforced the lesson: lazy people are condemned in Mathew 25:14–30, 1 Thessalonians 4:11, 2 Thessalonians 3:6, and Psalm 28:5. "But work is nothing more than a means which has no power of its own, but God alone [has power], who provides fruit according to his own power and will, just as he protects the upright and punishes the evil through temporal government, Romans 13[:1–7], 1 Peter 2[:13–14]." Mörlin echoed Luther's doctrine of providence, however, by noting that God takes care of his own bounteously in times of need, as he supplied sustenance to Elijah [1 Kgs 17:1–16, 19:4–8].²³

Mörlin provided little explanation of the second article of the Creed, simply

repeating Luther's language. He wove it together through nine questions that recalled Luther's words without formulating the kinds of definition he had elsewhere. He taught that "there is no other name than my Lord and dear deliverer, Jesus Christ, through whom alone I can be free and released from my sins." It is not clear why Mörlin did not provide a deeper exposition of what he regarded as the heart of the biblical message.²⁴ This is somewhat surprising in view of his deep, critical involvement in the controversy over Andreas Osiander's sharp divergence from the teaching of forensic justification that Mörlin had learned from Luther as well as Melancthon as a student.²⁵ Mörlin did touch upon elements of Christ's redeeming work in treating the Holy Spirit, who not only is holy in himself but also "makes us holy, that is, pure, upright or righteous, and saves us." He does so through creating faith in the merits and worthiness of Christ. The Holy Spirit creates that faith "through the gospel, that is, oral proclamation of Jesus Christ and the precious sacraments." He does that, Mörlin repeated with words borrowed from Luther, through calling, gathering, enlightening, sanctifying, and preserving individual believers and the whole Christian church on earth in that faith. The pupil was to ask what the Holy Spirit does with those who have contempt for preaching and the sacraments, a perpetual problem in every congregation. Mörlin assured his learners that these people have no hope of the resurrection of the body to life everlasting. This prompted the question, "Did not Christ die for all?" "Indeed, he did, not a single person is missing in the second article. For Christ indeed died for all and intended that all people, with no exceptions, be included in the holy church and community of saints in this third article except for those who do not accept his benefits, against God's will." That question led pupils to ask, "Who does that?" "Those who do not listen to and believe the pure, clear teaching and proclamation of the prophets, Christ, and the apostles." That message Mörlin defined as the forgiveness of sins and eternal life received through faith in the name of Jesus Christ."²⁶

Mörlin continued his definitions with his examination of prayer in Luther's Small Catechism. The introduction gave him opportunity to say more of the atonement, in answer to the question "how has he made us his children," whom he wishes to approach his "lofty and immense majesty?" That answer has to come through the second article and faith in Christ. Believers can come to God as his children "through the bitter death and glorious resurrection of his Son, through whom he wants us and commands us to place his word and message in our hearts and minds. With these words he wants us to glory in the comfort of being called his children." Mörlin summarized the prayer life that he was trying to cultivate in children with seven objects of their prayers: the pure preaching of God's word, a proper firm faith with humble, obedient hearts; protection from the devil, the world, and the flesh; preservation of their poor bodies in temporal need; daily forgiveness of sins and a heart filled with love of one another; the blessed and joyous end of every cross that he

places upon us to discipline our flesh; and deliverance from every adversity and at the end eternal life. In reviewing each petition of the Lord's Prayer, Mörlin returned to his practice of providing more precise definition for Luther's terminology.²⁷

Mörlin had fought to defend Luther's understanding of the Lord's Supper in the disputes over it in the Wittenberg circle as well as in interconfessional controversy,²⁸ and his adherence to Luther in this regard is reflected in his treatment of the sacraments. He defined them in Melancthonian terms as "outward signs and ceremonies, instituted by Christ himself, in which God bestows and gives to each [recipient] individually his promised grace and salvation, won for us by Christ." "What are the most important parts of each sacrament?" "Two: first, that Christ's work that he instituted in his church himself, with his mouth and eternal Word. Second, that he bestows and gives to each person through them eternal benefits, just as he does in the general proclamation that is offered to all . . . What cannot be shown from a clear word of the dear gospel that Christian instituted and commanded shall not be regarded as a sacrament, even if Christ instituted something but did not attach a promise of grace and salvation to it." Mörlin was clearly demarcating Luther's sacramental understanding from the medieval tradition and its longer list of sacraments that many parents had learned as children. "How many sacraments are there?" he then asked. "No more than two, baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Along with them we want to treat absolution," Mörlin answered. He recognized that the controversies over the Lord's Supper in which Luther and his followers had been involved could not be separated from those over baptism and absolution.²⁹ In some detail Mörlin then defined Luther's sacramental teaching by carefully unfolding the meaning of his catechetical exposition of baptism, confession and absolution, and the Lord's Supper.³⁰

Mörlin's brief explanation of that for which children were praying in the fourth petition summarized God's temporal blessings under the headings of those given in the walks of life of household and society.³¹ He found in Luther's vocational structure, as summarized in the "Household Chart" of Christian Callings, a comprehensive overview of the daily life of believers. "What does the Household Chart teach?" "It gives the believing heart a brief report in which the most important holy orders and walks of life on earth are comprehended and described, as a report on each person's responsibilities and service, so that he can take from it how he should live with a cheerful good conscience according to God's Word and will." Mörlin defined "holy orders and walks of life" as fundamental elements of human existence, "established by God and sanctified to his service, so that we know what should take place to please him." He listed the three elements of medieval societal structure that Luther had taken over for his framework for daily life,³² "the spiritual office of preaching, the temporal sword or power of governing, and the household." They are to be carried out in accord with God's word, will, and command.³³

Luther initially followed the medieval tradition and limited the “ecclesiastical” walk of life to priests, monks, and nuns; Mörlin did not follow the shift in Luther’s thinking that took place in the 1530s as he recognized that all Christians have assignments from God to witness and worship. Mörlin treated only the responsibilities of pastors, reflecting his own battles to establish the integrity of his office in every place he had served.³⁴ His instructions for the political-social callings did treat both the obedience of subjects and the responsibilities of governing officials for the preservation of the good for the upright and the punishment of evil. Rulers are not to “rapaciously act only as it pleases themselves.” Mörlin also posed the question, “if the temporal authorities intervene in spiritual matters, are we to set aside God’s Word or are we indeed to change something?” Caesar is due only what is his, not what is God’s. “Therefore, we are not obliged to the secular government [in such cases] and should not deprive God of what is his to give it to the secular authorities.

For even though their walks of life may be different, God loves all people equally as he created them and delivered them from sin.

For then we would be robbing from God and horrible vilifiers of our dear officials, as Tertullian says” (a singular citation from the ancient Fathers in Mörlin’s commentary). The governing authorities are to be obedient to God’s word and the proclamation of Christ, take care of church and school, and punish evil and encourage the upright in serving God alone.³⁵ The conflicts that led to his being forced into exile

by governing authorities in his first three parish calls, Arnstadt, Göttingen, and Königsberg, made Mörlin sensitive on this issue.

Mörlin treated the callings of spouses, parents and children, and “male and female household servants, day-laborers, and [regular] workers” in the household. He admonished spouses to mutual love and care. “If they have children, how should both parents act toward their children,” he asked. “They should first of all not be too harsh or bitter toward them so that the children not turn their hearts completely away from the parents and do everything grudgingly. Second, they should at the same time not let the children do anything they want but discipline them so that they behave well. Above all, they should see and maintain that their children fear God, desire to serve him and his church, when they grow up.”³⁶ Servants were to “practice concern and heartfelt respect, fidelity, and great diligence” in carrying out their household duties because it is service to God; God will send judgment on the unfaithful and negligent. The master and mistress of the household were to regard their servants with respect and not drive them as if they were dumb beasts. They should act fairly and remember that God will judge them if they act arbitrarily against what is fair in dealing with

those they employ. For even though their walks of life may be different, God loves all people equally as he created them and delivered them from sin.³⁷ Single brief comments answered questions regarding the meaning of Luther's last three "walks of life," youth, widowhood, and the common weal, to conclude Mörlin's instruction for the Christian life.³⁸

Mörlin's revision closed with an admonition to the "dear housefathers and godly youth of the praiseworthy city of Braunschweig." He reminded all that "where the catechism remains pure, the church will remain pure because it is the summary, indeed the core, the best of God's Word." Parents should use Luther's Small Catechism "pure" and explain it carefully to their children. Pastors and teachers should aid this process since schools are the dispensaries of the Holy Spirit, where the Holy Spirit is the master craftsman" who directs tender hearts. He urged the youth to store up the treasure of the catechism and its pure teaching so that they might pass it on to their children.³⁹

As a parish pastor Joachim Mörlin quickly learned that pastors not only needed advanced textbooks to continue the task that they undertook with Luther's Small Catechism as their tool. They also needed to define its language with specific application for the children of the congregation and perhaps their parents as well. In his preparation of such a supplement to the catechism he loved so much, Mörlin focused especially on the introduction of the rhythm of repentance, forgiveness of sins, and the cultivation of the form and practice of the faith in daily life. True to Luther's intention, Mörlin strengthened the use of the Small Catechism as a handbook for Christian living and service. To achieve his goals he used the method of definition with application to daily life and an expansion of the Bible verses placed before the children. He thus set in motion a tradition that continues today.

Endnotes

- 1 *Enchiridion. Der Kleine Catechismus Doc. Martini Lutheri/Sampt der Haustafel/in mehr Fragestu[e]ck vorfasst* (I have used the edition of Johann Michael Reu, *Quellen zur Geschichte des kirchlichen Unterrichts in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands zwischen 1530 und 1600* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1904–1935), 3,2,2:858–859. Bibliographies report at least twelve editions before 1600, and more may well have been printed. Such texts as a catechism were used in such a way that entire editions may have disappeared, so that more editions may have appeared. Extant editions include Nuremberg 1547; Magdeburg 1554; Leipzig 1560; Eisleben 1562; Eisleben 1564; Eisleben 1566; Leipzig: Bapst, 1566; Leipzig: Vögelin, 1566; Magdeburg 1570; Wolfenbüttel 1570, 1584, 1599).
- 2 On the regard for and use of Luther's catechisms among the first and second generations of his followers, see Robert Kolb, "The Layman's Bible: The Use of Luther's Catechisms in the German Late Reformation," in *Luther's Catechisms - 450 Years. Essays Commemorating the Small and Large Catechisms of Dr. Martin Luther*, ed. David P. Scaer and Robert D. Preus (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1979), 16–26, 75–79.

3. Robert Kolb, "Joachim Mörlin, Architect of Concordist Theology," in *Preaching and Teaching the Reformation: Essays in Honor of Timothy J. Wengert* (Minneapolis: Fortress, forthcoming).
4. *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, ed. Irene Dingel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 856/857,19/25–858/859,4/7, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 349.
5. *Der Gros Catechismus vnd Kinder Lere/ D. Mart. Luth. Fur die jungen Christen/ jnn Fragestücke verfasst* (Wittenberg: Georg Rhau, 1541).
6. See Kolb, "The Layman's Bible," 16–26.
7. Charles P. Arand, *That I may Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2000), 172–179.
8. *Enchiridion*, 860.
9. *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: Volume 2, 1552–1566*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 771 (769–799). Cf. Lyle Bierma, *The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism, a Reformation Synthesis* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2013), 13–28; Bierma calls attention to the parallel between Mörlin's exposition and the Heidelberg Catechism, p. 25.
10. *Enchiridion*, 861–862.
11. WA 10, 2: 377, 4–13, LW 43:13.
12. *Enchiridion*, –862.
13. WA DB 7:1/2, 17–12/13, 26, LW 35:366–372.
14. Cyriakus Spangenberg, *Auslegung der Ersten Acht Capitel der Episteln S. Pavli an die Ro[e]mer* (Strassburg: Samuel Emmel, 1566), 10b–14a.
15. BSELK 884/885, 13, BC 360.
16. *Enchiridion*, 861.
17. *Ibid.*, 862–863.
18. *Ibid.*, 864–865.
19. Matthias Richter, *Gesetz und Heil: Eine Untersuchung zur Vorgeschichte und zum Verlauf des sogenannten en Zweiten Antinomistischen Streits* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 176–202.
20. *Enchiridion*, 868.
21. *Ibid.*, 869.
22. Charles P. Arand, Robert Kolb, and James A. Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 220–221, 225–226.
23. *Enchiridion*, 870. Cf. Robert Kolb, "Luther's Providential God," in *The Interface of Science, Theology, and Religion. Essays in Honor of Alister E. McGrath*, ed. Dennis Ngien (Eugene: Pickwick, 2019), 48–65.
24. *Enchiridion*, 871.
25. Timothy J. Wengert, *Defending Faith. Lutheran Responses to Andreas Osiander's Doctrine of Justification, 1551–1559* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2012), 101–190.
26. *Enchiridion*, 871–872.
27. *Ibid.*, 873–878.
28. Cf. Robert Kolb, "The Critique of Melancthon's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper by his 'Gnesio-Lutheran' Students," in Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, Nicole Kuroпка, and Timothy J. Wengert, *Philip Melancthon: Theologian in Classroom, Confession, and Controversy* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 249–251; and idem, "Joachim Mörlin and the Heidelberg 'Defamation' of Martin Luther," in *Fides, Confessio et Pietas Studien zur Wirkungsgeschichte der Reformation. Festgabe für Ernst Koch zum 90. Geburtstag*, ed. Christoph Barnbrock and Christian Neddens (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, forthcoming).
29. As shown by Amy Nelson Burnett, *Debating the Sacraments: Print and Authority in the Early Reformation* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), esp. 250–268.
30. *Enchiridion*, 878–886.

- 31 Ibid., 876.
- 32 Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*; trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 1–37.
- 33 *Enchiridion*, 886–887.
- 34 *Enchiridion*, 887–888. Governmental authorities had removed him from office in Arnstadt, Göttingen, and Königsberg, and in Braunschweig he also struggled against interference from the city council. Cf. his *Von dem Beruff der Prediger. Und wie fern Weltliche Oberkeit macht hat, dieselbigen jres Ampts zu entsetzen, Nötiger christlicher bericht aus Gottes Wort* (Eisleben: Urban Gaubisch, 1565).
- 35 *Enchiridion*, 888–889. In addition to his suffering exile at the hands of three princes, Mörlin also had expressed his opposition to secular governments diverting property that belonged to the church to their own uses in a preface to the rebuke of his colleague Johannes Winnigstedt, *Kurzte anzeigung aus der heiligen Schrift/ vnd aus den B[e]chern der Veter wieder die Kirchendiebe der jtzigen zeit* (Jena: Thomas Rebart, 1560).
- 36 *Enchiridion*, 890–891.
- 37 Ibid., 891.
- 38 Ibid., 892.
- 39 Ibid., 892–893.

Mass Movement

A Meditation on Motion

David Weber



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“How’s it *going*?”
The greeting and reply, “It’s *going* good,”¹ frame well-being in terms of movement. Following, I make three underdeveloped claims about the meaning of movement that have helped me make sense of my participation in the Mass and of how

the Mass makes sense of my life. The first claim is that the trivial greeting tacitly expresses the desire for a transcendent goodness where the “It’s *going*-good” never ends. The second claim is that in a physicalist milieu, the desire for a going-good life must end in disappointment unless rescued by the metaphysics of movement. The third claim is that the ritual movement of the Mass both explains and sustains the Christian metaphysics of movement that makes it reasonable to hope for an eternally going-good life.

From Trivial Greeting to Transcendent Good

Movement is the preferred metaphor to speak of well-being. This reflects the importance we give to movement that is evident in English words derived from the Latin *ductus*, like *duct*, which is a *conduit* that directs movement to a desired end. Inscriptions on Roman ruins praise the almost god-like skills of engineers who moved water through *aqueducts*.² *Deduct* and *induct* imagine reasoning as up and down movements, going between the clarity of having a point and the creativity in making a point. *Seduction* warns us of deceptive movements so that we might *conduct* ourselves wisely, perhaps by becoming *educated* enough to distinguish hard truths from easy lies.

When it seemed that the world was stuck in frustration, God promised salvation.

Ex nihilo is the term of art for the Genesis account of creation as the movement *from* nothingness to *life*.³ The formal/first cause of creation was the linguistic movement where God's thoughts were put into words that formed the physical world. Humans enjoyed the goodness of creation as the movement *from* desire (hunger and loneliness) *to* the satisfaction

given by fruit and fruitfulness.⁴ Time's movement measured creation's progress over six successive days of crescendoing complexity and beauty that culminated with the cessation of movement on the seventh day.⁵ As such, creation defines the going-good life in terms of various movements: time moving toward a desired culmination in a linguistic-like movement where a meaningful sentence accumulates meaning by the unification of fragments or like the movement from deprivation to the satisfaction experienced in eating.

The fall reversed creation's natural *ex nihilo* movement *to life* so that the new natural became the an *nihilo* movement *to annihilation*. This movement to death began with the first seduction (Gn 3) where language disguised the truth, which made it reasonable to imagine creation going-good without the Creator. The seduction was laid bare by the anxious realization that *commotion* was the dominate movement forever frustrating the desire for an eternally going-good life.

When it seemed that the world was stuck in frustration, God promised salvation. The Exodus was both a historical moment and a universal prototype where salvation is a movement *from* the "house of bondage," *through* the wilderness, and *to* the promised land.⁶ As this movement was neither inevitable nor impossible, hope in God's promise needed to be repeatedly explained and sustained especially when experiencing unpromising circumstances.

In the legends of the Holy Grail (not *Monty Python's*), the chalice used at the last supper promised healing because it magically retained the lingering effect of Christ's real presence. This healing would be given "to the first comer who asks the guardian of the vessel, a king three-quarters paralyzed by the most painful wound, 'What are you going through?'"⁷ Asking a paralyzed king what he is "going through" would be cruelly ironic if his paralysis were permanent. But in a world where Jesus is the *Way (via)* who opened the way of life to wayfarers (*viators*), asking the king what he is "going through" acknowledges the gravity of his affliction while anticipating the grace that promises movement past the paralysis to eternal life.

The Physics and Metaphysics of Movement

Of course, physicalists dismiss such metaphysical movement as meaningless. Meaningful movement is material and measurable by calculating mass and velocity

over time. Metaphysics is not measurable and so, not meaningful. What meaning does physics give to human movement? Not being a physicist, I accept on faith that one of modern physics' most important discoveries is that, as heat moves, so moves the universe. This second law of thermodynamics states that in the closed physical cosmos eventually all energy always moves from a state of ordered motion to a state of commotion called entropy. Put more artfully, entropy means that "this world in its present form is passing away" (1 Cor 7:31), or that the movement of *time* is "incinerating every moment of our lives,"⁸ or time is "one more name for death,"⁹ or the dawn declares that "Unresting death (is) a whole day nearer now."¹⁰

Fig leaves first indicated that this intolerable truth demanded we devise increasingly sophisticated distractions. This is a problem, says psychologist Steven Pinker, because our mental health requires that we number our days to make the most of our diminishing time to "deploy energy and information to fight back the tide of entropy and carve out refuges of beneficial order."¹¹ Or, as the poet Kay Ryan puts it, "I guess the big job is trying to hold off the rush of matter toward itself, the collapse of space. And of course the collapse of time."¹² Such stoicism is, in a way, admirable. But when "seizing the day" is just another way of saying "chasing the wind" (Eccl 1), the Apostle Paul's suggested we might be better served by following the Epicurean strategy of using good things to distract us from our bad end (1 Cor 15).

Or, we might escape physicalist despair by turning to the kind of metaphysics considered by the Christian theologian, Simon Oliver in his *Philosophy, God and Motion*.¹³ Oliver draws from premodern philosophical and theological thinkers to explain why it was *reasonable* to hope that life is the movement toward perfection rather than dissolution.

How could it be reasonable to hope for a perfection that has never yet been experienced? Yet, the word *perfect* is a perfectly serviceable word in everyday speech. A thing is perfect when it comes closer to an ideal that has also never been experienced. No one has experienced the iPhone 100 and yet, we are certain that this future phone will be more perfect than the first iPhone. We are so convinced that technological life naturally moves towards perfection that going back to an old phone is embarrassing if not unthinkable.

Even in a physicalist milieu, we presume the truth of perfection when we imagine that health is more natural than illness even though the natural history of the body ends in unhealth. When healthy, it is easy to imagine our body getting stronger and lasting longer than it ever does. And when we fall sick, we do not stoically accept illness as a fitting foretaste of our inevitable collapse into entropy. Sickness means that something has gone wrong and we are frustrated until that "error" or "evil" is fixed or we despair.

Oliver explains that premoderns presumed the actuality of perfection because they routinely experienced perfection. They thought that we experienced perfection

from afar when seeing the “perfection of the circular motion” of the heavens that reflect a cosmic “design and proportion”; a “unity and stability” that made it reasonable to expect to enjoy a “ceaseless and intelligent life for all time.”¹⁴ In the premodern world, the heavens literally declared the glory of God (Ps 19:1). On earth, this heavenly perfection was experienced in hearing harmonious music that mysteriously reflected the “harmonic music of the heavens.”¹⁵ The mystic-mathematician Pythagoras thought that musical pitch was, at once, a physical phenomenon generated by material instruments manipulating the “the length of the string.”¹⁶ As a mystic, Pythagoras thought that stringing together these “*measured* harmonic proportions” over time, generated the music that moved one to believe in the cosmos’ “symmetry, proportion, order and beauty.”¹⁷

As we live in time, we repeatedly experience perfection in the movements of the heavens and of music. But, we experience perfection in passing and this is our problem. The deeper our experience of perfection, the sadder is its passing.¹⁸ The metaphysical challenge is to transform our experiences of passing perfection from leaving a bitter aftertaste of passing into a blessed foretaste of perfection.¹⁹ This challenge was met with the belief that the perfection of the heavenly sphere could

How could it be reasonable to hope for a perfection that has never yet been experienced?

donate its “permanence and stability” to the passing world.²⁰ A cosmos characterized by donation would see energy transfer as a kind of charitable donation rather than a violent movement toward entropic extinction. However, once the heavens were discovered to be part of the physical cosmos, donation was dismissed as a distinction that made no real

difference as it could offer no hope of humans enjoying a “ceaseless and intelligent life for all time.” The movements of the heavens and of music generated a desire that could never be satisfied.

Christians always believe that the hope of donation is a christological truth and not a cosmological truth. The hope rested on the truth of Christ’s resurrection so that, “If Christ has not been raised” wrote St. Paul, “faith is futile” and we remain in captivity to entropy. Because Christ is raised, Christians hopefully expect that the bitterness of all our existential losses will be transfigured into blessed foretastes as indicated by Jesus’s Beatitudes. Poverty is blessed if it is a moving stage of deprivation that increases our desire for perfection. Blessed deprivation works like hunger and thirst which are essential elements in the joy of eating. Sadness is blessed because it gives weight to our rejoicing. Meekness makes sense as a mode of living because the movement of time humbles the mighty and blesses the humble (Lk 1:52). This hope

that Christ's presence transfigures the bitter into the blessed was embodied by the thief crucified with Jesus. Being drawn by the beauty of Christ's cross,²¹ he expected Jesus's donated perfection to transfigure his cross from a bitter termination of a squandered life into a blessed stage of his pilgrimage to paradise.

Mass Movement

In the Mass, Christ is present as "the still *telos* in the midst of the motion." By the Mass I mean the ritual setting of the Eucharist—comprised of five songs, the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Credo*, *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*—that explains and sustains the hope of Christ's real presence in two ways. The first is how we *come to know* the truth of Christ's real presence as the *saturated* text of each song makes sense of our suffering existential experiences of loss. The second is the movement between these songs which conveys the *symmetry* of a life that lives and moves and has its being in Christ. I will all but ignore the saturated texts in order to ever so briefly discuss how the sense of symmetry conveyed in the movement of the Mass.

The first movement from the *Kyrie* to *Gloria* maps the path of *joy* that energizes the *rejoicing* of worship. The movement from deprivation to satisfaction begins with misery's cry for mercy. Christ's donation is already at work before we cry for mercy as our embittered lips must be loosed so that our mouths are capable of bringing forth praises rather than spitting out curses (Ps 51). We confidently pray for mercy because knowing that our deprivation is a stage on the way that leads to the *Gloria* which sings of the glory of the incarnation. Having experienced God's sudden liberation of Israel from exile, the psalmist sang of being overcome by despair one moment then overjoyed the next moment with a spontaneous "laughter and a glad song" (Ps 126). (I suspect that Isaac—whose name means "to laugh"—would have understood this surprising laughter.)

At the midpoint of the Mass, the *Credo* anchors our hope for going-good life in the goodness of the Trinity. Experiencing the passing perfection of the Father's creation ends in the sadness and outrage of passing unless and until we have salvation. This salvation in the second article is the second exodus where Jesus's movement from birth, through his bitter suffering and death and to the resurrection opens the way to life. Finally, as called coparticipants with the Holy Spirit, the church is God's presence in the most fallen regions of the fallen world.

Recognizing that it is God's intention to infiltrate the fallen world, we sing the *Sanctus* to recount Isaiah's holy, holy, holy encounter with God. This frightful vision of God's real presence (Is 6) concludes with Isaiah volunteering to return to the world as God's representative of salvation. So, the "holy, holy, holy" moves to the "hosanna in the highest" (Mt 21:9) which recounts Jesus's movement to Jerusalem to finish the work of salvation. The *Agnus Dei* completes the Mass's movement from mercy to mercy; the "Lamb of God" answering the "Lord, have mercy" plea. The song

celebrates the great exchange where the Lamb takes away the sin of the world and gives us a peace that the world cannot give, and apparently, the world does not want. Unless, that is, the trivial greeting really does tacitly desire the transcendent good which we have come to know as God's presence which we repeatedly enjoy in the Mass's movement.

Endnotes

- 1 I apologize to the grammatically sensitive for the grating use of "good." It cannot be helped.
- 2 Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 65, 77.
- 3 The Jewish toast, *l'chaim*, makes the happy association of life's movement with the natural history of the grape, where, in the cask, the movement of time brings about fermentation rather than decay.
- 4 "From every fruit of the garden you may surely eat" (2:16) and "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (1:28).
- 5 "And we may read in the first chapter of Genesis that God 'ended his work which he had made' and 'behold, it was very good.' In leisure, man too celebrates the end of his work by allowing his inner eye to dwell for a while upon the reality of the Creation. He looks and he affirms: it is good." Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 48–49.
- 6 Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 3–17.
- 7 Simone Weil, *Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God*. <https://www.hagiasophiaclassical.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Right-Use-of-School-Studies-Simone-Weil.pdf>.
- 8 Abraham Heschel, *Sabbath* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2005), 5.
- 9 This is C. S. Lewis's understanding of time when caught in the thick of grief. *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 25.
- 10 Philip Larkin, "Aubade" <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48422/aubade-56d229a6e2f07>. "An aubade is a morning love song, or a song or poem about lovers separating at dawn. It has also been defined as 'a song or instrumental composition concerning, accompanying, or evoking daybreak.'" <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aubade>.
- 11 Steven Pinker, <https://www.edge.org/response-detail/27023>.
- 12 Kay Ryan, *Synthesizing Gravity: Selected Prose* (New York: Grove Press, 2020), 236.
- 13 Simon Oliver, *Philosophy, God and Motion* (London: Routledge, 2013).
- 14 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 15 *Ibid.*, citing Plato, 8.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 14ff.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 18 Augustine reflects on the death of his friend stating: "With this grief my heart was steeped in shadow. Look where I would, I saw only death. . . . my home was haunted by sorrow. Whatever I had done with him became, without him, an extreme torture. . . . Weeping was my only comfort. It alone took the place of my friend, 'my soul's delight.'" Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Garry Wills (London: Penguin, 2006), Bk iv. 32.
- 19 Simon Oliver cites Aquinas who states: "'The gifts of grace are added to nature in such a way that they do not destroy it, but rather perfect it. So too the light of faith, which is imparted to us as a gift, does not do away with the light of natural reason given to us by God. . . . Rather, since what is imperfect bears a resemblance to what is perfect, what we know by natural reason has some likeness to what is taught to us by faith (Aquinas, *In librum Boethii De Trinitate expositio*, 2.3. responsio).'" Oliver, *Philosophy*, 86–87.
- 20 Oliver, *Philosophy*, 96.
- 21 Oliver states, "This is an aesthetic construal of the incarnation; its reason lies in its intrinsic beauty, appropriateness or proportion—and therefore truth." *Ibid.*, 131.

Unsalted Popcorn or Unpopcorned Salt Niebuhr's Christ and Culture in Paradox

Philip J. Hohle



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published two books on film interpretation: *Lenses* (2018) and *The Filmmaker's Prayer* (2019). Currently, he teaches for the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor and Southeastern University.

Merely thinking about popcorn makes one hungry, does it not? Popcorn is a nearly perfect snack. After all, what other food provides a series of explosions while it cooks? Not to mention the wonderful aroma. What's not to love about popcorn? Even so, have you ever wondered why some people insist on having that bucket of popcorn when watching a movie? Clinical psychologist Sophie Mort

claims it is because both eating food and watching movies can offer a quick hit of dopamine, the pleasure chemical.¹ Maybe popcorn makes a movie more intense, more gratifying, and more transformational. What movie watching experience is complete without popcorn?

Let us allow popcorn to serve as a metaphor in this consideration of movies and pop culture entertainment. To make the metaphor work, we should lay aside any underlying concerns for nutrition. So consider this: Have you ever tried popcorn without salt? The snack is not nearly as satisfying—you might as well be eating Styrofoam packing noodles. But then again, too much salt ruins the whole bucket.

Editor's note

This essay was originally presented at Concordia Seminary's inaugural Faith and Film Festival, January 23-25, 2020.

No one would sit down to watch a movie with a box of salt. Where is the pleasure in that? Where is the dopamine?

In any given evening in theaters and living rooms, viewers will consume a bucket of pop culture—with pleasure. And like a single kernel of popcorn, one film or television episode is not enough. Of course, the metaphor would suggest that binge-watching is the psychological equivalent of gluttony. The underlying questions are: Who cares? Does it really matter? Why interrupt the important learning at a seminary to have a film festival? In scholarly terms, are media effects really as powerful as some fear they are?

Perhaps watching an episode or two of *The Handmaid's Tale* or *Game of Thrones* will not cause any immediate harm. Nevertheless, a diet of buckets of pop culture consumed night after night may indeed evoke a change in one's strongest-held beliefs. Immediately or eventually, movies can indeed produce powerful media effects.

This article is taken from the address I presented at the inaugural Faith and Film Festival at Concordia Seminary. In that presentation, I attempted to make a case for the following truths:

1. As a medium, films are extraordinarily powerful in shaping, confirming, or disrupting people's worldviews.
2. Virtually all movies are inherently religious. As such, the story represents the *Filmmaker's Prayer*.²

These truths are already self-evident for many of us. The lingering effects of watching *Bambi* when I was a small child has made me a lousy deer hunter even today. And, as a high-school student, my soul was set afire when the movie *The Exorcist* revealed that the devil is a terrifyingly malicious presence, one who is quite active in our world. Almost literally, it scared the hell out of me.

Thesis: Unsalted Popcorn—Antithesis: Unpopcorned Salt—Synthesis: Salted Popcorn

Let me propose that many of our friends, neighbors, and family members are passive or indiscriminate consumers of pop culture. They consume a diet of *unsalted popcorn*. At the same time, I further propose that many of us working from inside the church do not have the lenses that would allow us to recognize the religiosity in many of these entertaining stories. As such, we tend to underestimate their influence. A diet of salt. No popcorn. Let us call it, *unpopcorned salt*.

In 2011, I participated in the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. Among the many films I consumed that week, I attended the screening of a film by the emerging Italian filmmaker Alice Rohrwacher. I found *Corpo Celeste* to be an incredibly rich religious movie. It is a poignant story about an unchurched adolescent girl struggling to make sense of the Catholic religion and the person of Jesus Christ.³

Yet during the question and answer that followed the screening, all the audience wanted to know was which camera was used and more about the actress in the lead role. It became evident that this astute audience was unable or unwilling to consider the movie on anything but a conventional level. At least in this setting, they were only comfortable discussing the aesthetics of the film craft.

Average film watchers, even professional reviewers from time to time, are stuck in simple conventional interpretations—the performance of one particular actor, or how this movie compares to others in the genre. They seem quite capable of analyzing the *movie*, but incapable or unwilling to examine the *story* in any real depth. What they often miss is the realization that what one experiences when watching a movie with a conventional lens is quite different from an experience interpreting with a less-conventional or unconventional lens.⁴

[The Less-Conventional level] is where sensitive viewers might be disturbed or disrupted in some way. They may experience a touch of fear, feel unsettled or happy, or sense a vague awakening. Should a viewer begin to question his own or the filmmaker's assumptions, they are no longer reading on a conventional level. . . . Of course, when movies really shake you up, when you leave the theater full of anxiety or euphoria, when you cannot keep your mind off the story—you are already processing the film on an unconventional level. It becomes personal. On this level, you internalize the story wholly and intimately. You retain the message in your psyche where it becomes a filter of perception. A movie can become so earth-shaking that the story forms a facet in the schemata that you use forthwith to make sense of the world. It may enable you to move forward in life, or in some extreme cases, it can freeze you with an overpowering doubt that disrupts your world. If you find life's answers in the movie, you are likely to be processing the story on an unconventional level.⁵

In effect, as the credits roll, you may be asking yourself, “Why is my spirit burning within me?”

Such an awakening reminds me of the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. It is fascinating to read the surprising number of instances recorded in the Bible where the disciples and other followers had trouble recognizing Jesus.⁶ The psyche filters one's perception—but let us not forget the power of the Holy Spirit in this regard. On a conventional level at first, these two guys from Emmaus could only see a rather clueless traveler who needed to be caught up on the big news. The very moment of the breaking of the bread was the revealing prompt for them. This visual was a *cinematic* moment—the cue that freed Cleopas and his buddy

from a conventional lens of perception. The action opened their eyes to a new, unconventional interpretation. In one simple motion, Jesus changed their perception of the whole week's events—as well as what scripture was revealing about him. Now they could see him.

Every night, people will leave movie theaters with their hearts burning within. Those of us working from inside the church should become more sensitive to the media effects smoldering in our people. To do so, we must have an awareness that films can influence people's religious and moral worldviews. Likewise, we have a fantastic opportunity to guide viewers into a deeper awareness of the person of Christ and the character of God often revealed in these popular stories.

In what follows, I seek to demonstrate how we, those who are comfortable with living in Luther's enigmatic two kingdoms, are uniquely qualified to hold together the tension between popcorn and salt—between the filmmaker's compelling prayers (whatever they may be) and the pure gospel. We can and should become fluent viewer-critics—articulate in reading and responding to the unavoidable paradoxes encountered in postmodern living.

The Filmmaker's Three Choices

The medium of film, which one can easily argue is the best storyteller of all, is the prevailing repository of our culture's imagination. In any given movie, it may be the

The medium of film is the prevailing repository of our culture's imagination.

scriptwriter who gets the credit for the story's impact. In others, it might be the director or actor with this influence. In *The Filmmaker's Prayer and Lenses*,⁷ I use a single term to represent any and all who have a role in fashioning the story. I label all the sources of this creativity, the *filmmaker*. Likewise, all the tools and techniques of storytelling

employed by the filmmaker become a *proposition*. That is, by using the best practices of the craft, the filmmaker invites us to join the protagonist on a quest to uphold some cherished value. As the filmmaker's hero concludes the journey, he or she brings a boon back to the fictional community. In reality, the elixir, this moral to the story, is the filmmaker's invitation to the viewer to likewise experience the transcendent change. The proposition becomes the filmmaker's prayer for us.

As films are inherently religious, the filmmaker will typically make one of three propositions:

1. The filmmaker will disguise his/her religion. The film's protagonist may even appear to embrace a secular or non-religious worldview. But directly or

indirectly, true or false, all movies make a statement about who or what is considered to be god. Perhaps the filmmaker will suggest this god is coldly distant, or present and demanding, or maybe even a comic figure. Similarly, the filmmaker will make a statement on what is worthy of worship and what must no longer be worshiped. Due to the subtleties of filmmaking, the viewer might not sense the film is religious at all if they only watch with a conventional lens. On the unconventional level, meanwhile, this religious underscore is in full operation, waiting to be discovered. For example, if one uses a less-conventional lens, they are certain to discover religiosity in movies like *Life of Pi* or *Toy Story*.

2. A second option for the filmmaker is to oppose religion directly—positioning as the antagonist that character who represents traditional institutions or practices. Even watching such movies on a conventional level, the viewer may get the idea that all religion is, at best, irrelevant, and at worst, harmful. Using a less-conventional lens, one can easily find these anti-religious propositions in *The Life of Brian* and *There Will Be Blood*. With an unconventional lens, one may also recognize the sentiment in films like *Ex Machina* or *Whiplash* or even *Silence*. Of course, the simple absence of religion in a protagonist's story is often a thinly disguised statement on the filmmaker's attitudes toward God and the church.
3. A third approach presents a comparison or contrast of religious viewpoints. One stance is to *exclude* another religion—illustrating to some degree in the plot that one is better than another. One can recognize this in *Avatar*, where the naturalistic or animistic religion of the Na'vi is shown to be superior to the materialistic and crusader-like worldviews of the humans. Conversely, the filmmaker can be *inclusive* in the plot—a synergistic proposition that all religions are becoming one. In the recent *Two Popes*, the filmmaker makes the unmistakable proposal that these two pontiffs have essentially come to be on the same page when it comes to the character of God and the role of the church. But if viewed with a less-conventional lens, one may sense that this page has mostly the filmmaker's ideological imprints upon it—his vision for a universal church, one that ignores or minimizes fundamentally divergent assumptions about God.

Consuming the filmmaker's propositions indiscriminately is like eating a tub of popcorn without salt. A viewer may never recognize a filmmaker's prayer if one simply enjoys films on a conventional level. But of course, salt makes popcorn better. When one dives into more unconventional interpretations, the movie viewing experience always becomes more interesting, or in many cases, more powerful. In extending the metaphor, let us say that eating our popcorn with salt is sure to be more nourishing for the soul.

The Viewer's Three Choices

Considering salt and popcorn, let us apply H. Richard Niebuhr's taxonomy of five ways a Christian may respond to pop culture.⁸ Added to my take on Niebuhr's dispositions is what Fuller Seminary professor Robert K. Johnson sees as denominational characteristics in each of the viewpoints, and a suggestion on how one might approach popular film from each lens.⁹

Like the filmmaker, the viewer has three choices for their bucket. The first two of Niebuhr's viewpoints I would classify as:

Unsalted Popcorn

A viewpoint of Christ *above* Culture is what Johnson suggests is the Catholic position. For one watching with this lens, it would be unimaginable even to consider that the filmmaker could transfigure the character of God. It would be unthinkable for a movie's so-called Christ figure to bear any resemblance to Christ himself. Disregarding movie's strong media effects, these viewers would reject the notion that people's beliefs about God and religion can be changed from an exposure to pop culture. Thus, religious film festivals like this would be considered somewhat irrelevant, since it matters not what people watch or like. They may say, "Don't waste good salt on this popcorn."

A viewpoint of Christ *of* Culture is what Johnson suggests is the liberal Protestant position. For the sake of entertainment, one watching from this viewpoint will easily find Christ figures in protagonists who promote the progressive agenda. Any politically *woke* character is fair game to represent the best aspects of Christ himself. From this viewpoint, one may even find some transgressive antiheroes to be Christ-like. For example, viewers who can recognize a Christ figure in the character of Star-Lord from *Guardians of the Galaxy* would likely be watching from this viewpoint.¹⁰ The problem is that when one applies the Christ-figure label to transgressive characters, it may produce a backwash of impurity that further degrades the culture's perception of the person of Christ.

Unpopcorned Salt

The viewpoint of Christ *against* Culture is what Johnson suggests is the position of the Fundamentalist. One taking this viewpoint would argue that certain movies, or even all pop culture, should be avoided or even prohibited among followers of Christ. Energy is spent persuading other Christians to cleanse themselves of these toxic influences.¹¹ A faith and film festival might be considered heretical. This viewpoint is all salt, no popcorn.

The lens of Christ *transforming* Culture is what Johnson suggests is the position of the typical Evangelical. From this viewpoint, one must loyally produce or consume films that are crafted intentionally to win souls to Christ. Dr. Paul Radford at Bob

Jones University observes, “The Church has developed a taste for the saccharin-sweet in their well-intended search for family-friendly entertainment.”¹² Many scholars like Radford argue that the Evangelical filmmaker’s propositions are often cobbled together in a way that renders them flavorless. Furthermore, in order to engineer conversion within the span of a two-hour movie, these films leave little room for shades of grey. In their economy, they often become theologically confusing at best, and harmful at worst.

Perhaps the best example of this problem is the popular movie *I Can Only Imagine*. If you have heard the Mercy Me song of the same title you know it is about the spectacular moment of seeing Christ in heaven one day. Yet the filmmaker chooses, no less at the very climax of the movie, to shift the context. As the protagonist premieres his song to a concert audience, he imagines, not Jesus standing in the auditorium, but his recently deceased father. We can only imagine what the non-Christian is thinking at this moment in the movie. (“Wait, is Dennis Quaid supposed to be Jesus? After all, he’s dressed in white, backlit with a halo, and has a really nice smile.”)

Salted Popcorn

The lens of Christ and Culture in Paradox is what Johnson suggests is uniquely Lutheran, based on the understanding of Luther’s concept of two kingdoms. One from this viewpoint becomes increasingly fluent in film interpretation. On the one hand, they can appreciate transcendent films even when they are theologically imperfect—or only indirectly point one to Christ as the ultimate source of transcendence. These viewers can still find value in filmmakers who barely get it right in their direct or indirect propositions concerning the true character of God. Furthermore, they can guide other viewers beyond the conventional surface impressions into those less-conventional. These viewer-critics know it is at the deep levels of our psyche where our worst fears are hidden and where our unresolved pain is incarcerated. And yet they also know it is at this level where the fount of joy can be found, where faith and hope reside. These folks are not afraid to delve into the unconventional, knowing that the filmmaker is already one step ahead of us.¹³

Johnson’s Lutheran will eat the popcorn but therein lies the paradox. This viewer also craves salt. The lens will require one to be wise as a serpent, knowing to don lab coat, gloves, and safety goggles when addressing those films that are morally or theologically challenging. Indeed, this caution is what we must exercise when examining films like Darren Aronofsky’s *Mother!*¹⁴ With the right amount of salt, these viewers are able to allow transgressive films to speak for themselves, but if sin wins the day, they are equipped to call out a tragedy for what it is. Those using this viewpoint will be bold in addressing and countering the alternative religious propositions the filmmakers bring like a boon to receptive viewers longing for transcendence.

The Filmmaker's Prayer

Directly or indirectly, all films are religious. As Johnson puts it, they have an inherent “sacramental capacity” to convey religious ideas.¹⁵ Ultimately, on the conventional or the unconventional level, these popular stories work at defining the character of God for mass audiences. The filmmaker cannot make a prayer for the viewer’s transcendence without also proposing from where it comes. In response, we have three choices—three ways we can respond to these prayers and propositions.

Of course, we can continue to consume movies and pop culture as undemanding *viewers*. To maintain a sense of entertainment on the conventional level, we can satisfy ourselves with the filmmaker’s propositions. All popcorn—take and eat.

Directly or indirectly, all films are religious.

Alternatively, one can play the critic, remaining aloof and detached from the dopamine-laced enjoyment that filmmakers invent for pleasure. Some may even attempt to insulate and protect our fellow Christians from

the harmful and powerful effects of pop culture. All salt.

The third choice represents a synthesis. We can live comfortably in both kingdoms, taking care to consume only salted popcorn. Indeed, there is an urgent need for *Christian* viewer-critics, those who can appreciate the popcorned, dopamine-infused conventional level of entertainment, while simultaneously applying salt in interpreting and responding to the filmmaker’s propositions and prayers on the unconventional level.

Recognizing the filmmaker’s prayer is the first step toward becoming a fluent viewer-critic, one who can guide others in making sense of the pop culture artifacts we consume. One can mitigate potentially harmful media effects by assisting friends, family, and neighbors in putting those influential stories in proper context. By comparison or contrast, the Christian viewer-critic will interpret these artifacts in light of the greatest story of all, in consideration of the ultimate monomyth, in relation to the most-heroic Christ figure of Christ himself.

Endnotes

- 1 As reported in Emily Laurence's blog "Why Snacking in Front of the TV Just Feels So Good, According to Experts." <https://www.wellandgood.com/good-food/eating-watching-tv/> (May 23, 2019).
- 2 A thesis I explored more thoroughly in the book *Cinema and Religion: The Filmmaker's Prayer* (Austin, TX: Parabolic Media, 2019).
- 3 https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1886502/?ref_=nv_sr_srs_g_0
- 4 I developed my concept of the various depths of interpretation from those proposed by Robert L. Scott, "Focusing Rhetorical Criticism," *Communication Education* 33, (1984): 89–96.
- 5 Hohle, *Cinema & Religion*, 10 ff.
- 6 For example, the disciples on the boat (Mk 6:49) and in the upper room (Lk 24:37) thought they were seeing a ghost. Even when looking right at Jesus, Mary Magdalene thought she was talking to a gardener (Jn 24:14). In the aptly named transfiguration, Jesus's face changed right before the disciples' eyes (Lk 9:29).
- 7 Philip J. Hohle, *Lenses: 10 Ways to Interpret the Movies You Love (and some you hated)* (Austin, TX: Parabolic Media, 2018), 2.
- 8 It is plausible that Niebuhr spent some time on the campus of Concordia Seminary a century ago during his days at Washington University and Eden Seminary.
- 9 Robert K. Johnson, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 78.
- 10 From a less conventional interpretation, the character of Groot provides a better mnemonic for the Christ. His name alone is suspiciously close to the root of Jesse. Meanwhile, his continual declaration, "I am Groot" is reminiscent of the definitive "I am" of Genesis 3:14 or "I am . . . the vine" among Jesus's declarations in John 15:1.
- 11 I revised this manuscript just days after the performances of Jennifer Lopez and Shakira at the 2020 Super Bowl. I am finding the Christ-against-Culture approach quite evident among my Facebook friends. No doubt, there are times when the exigency requires higher doses of salt.
- 12 Paul Radford, "Instant Uplift: Flannery O'Connor's Sentimentality in Christian Film" (presentation, 2014 Baylor Symposium on Faith and Culture, Waco, TX, Oct. 2014). Radford's insights are significant in that even those in the Bob Jones University community recognize the preponderance of sentimentality in this kind of movie fare.
- 13 I am reminded of Paul's stroll down the streets of Athens as recorded in Acts 17:16–23. In this chapter, Paul is confronted by Athenians who were fluent in the pop culture of the day. Perhaps the original viewer-critic, Paul recognized the competing religiosity ingrained throughout Greek culture. On the other hand, he recognized that the Athenians longed for some yet-unknown transcendence. Those familiar with the conversion of C. S. Lewis will note how this same longing served as the portal for his return to Christianity. See C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), 76–77. Like Lewis and the Athenians, all humans have an innate and itching desire to gaze upward, but may not yet have found the ultimate object or person worthy of their worship. No doubt, filmmakers have gained considerable traction in becoming our culture's chief nominators of what or who should be considered worthy.
- 14 In fact, at the 2020 inaugural Faith and Film Festival at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, a screening of this controversial film followed immediately after this address.
- 15 Johnson, *Reel Spirituality*, 74.

*Homiletical
Helps*

Anatomy of a Sermon

On Acts 17:22–28 by Yared Halche

Benjamin Haupt

Author's note: the following sermon was preached in the Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, on January 25, 2017. You can listen to a recording of the sermon at <https://scholar.csl.edu/cs1617/58/>. Sessions from the 2017 Multiethnic Symposium can be heard online at <https://scholar.csl.edu/mucu/2017/>. The sermon is represented in italic type below which can be read all at once by following the gray bars in the margin.

Good morning! We have our African, beautiful doxology that says, “God is good.” (The congregation responds, “All the time.”) Let’s do it again. God is good! (The congregation responds, “All the time.”) All the time. (The congregation responds, “God is good.”) One more time. God is good! (The congregation responds, “All the time.”) All the time. (The congregation responds, “God is good.”) Amen. And indeed, he is good. There is a folk story in Ethiopia that talks about a skinny cow that was eating dry grass, dead grass. And out of the blue a big bull came straight to this skinny cow and attacked it. And actually, it tossed it with its mighty horn. The skinny cow flew like a bird in the air. When it landed, however, it landed in a fenced green pasture. It landed in a great, great—in the middle of a great, great, great, great harvest and she cannot help enjoying and actually, even opening some doors through the fences for other skinny cows. It must have been Liberia, right? People are laughing now here.

Dr. Yared Halche, originally from Ethiopia and now a mission executive in the Southeastern District of the LCMS, preached this sermon on the second day of the 2017 Multiethnic Symposium. Along with many other people from all over the world and from all kinds of people groups, it’s quite possible that there were other Ethiopians as well as Liberians in the chapel that morning. Those not familiar with African geography will be helped in understanding this story by knowing that the far eastern portion of central Africa where Ethiopia is located resembles the shape of a horn and is mostly desert. Liberia is on the far western side of Africa and is much more verdant. In telling a traditional folk story from his home country, Dr. Halche’s introduction helps hearers begin thinking about people from different countries and ethnicities, part of the aim of the symposium.

So, the Apostle Paul, due to severe persecution, was pushed out of Thessalonica and Berea, and he landed at a place called Athens, Greece. It wasn't by his own design, but persecution moved him to a place called one of the wonderful, beautiful mission fields called Athens, Greece. He found actually himself in Athens and bombarded with many, many, many, many idols. And he was so much distressed now, not only just with the persecution he faced, but what he was entering into many, many, many idols. And I think that is not strange for us now to observe those many, many, many idols around us.

As Dr. Halche moves into the body of his sermon, we see him preaching in an expository style. In this first paragraph of the section, he explains a bit of the background of the text of his sermon, Acts 17:22–28. To provide this background, he summarizes the immediately preceding section of Acts 17:1–15 and offers a one sentence summary of the persecution which pushed Paul out of Thessalonica and Berea. Halche then brings the attention of the hearers to the idols that surrounded Paul in Athens. In true expository fashion, he ends this paragraph of exposition of the text by turning our attention from the idols in Athens to the idols around us today. For a gathering of Christian leaders assembled at the Multiethnic Symposium, Halche can assume that his hearers will be convicted by the law (especially the first commandment) as he uncovers the idols that all Christians regularly gather around themselves.

He was moved by the Spirit of God out of that desperate and also zealous, passionate love for the love of Jesus for his people. He went to the synagogues and marketplaces day by day. Missionaries going to the mission field day by day and conversing, arguing, reasoning with the people of Athens. And he told them about this amazing, loving God. And he told them that God created a special, unique place for you in his heart. You are part of God's heart. You are his offspring, his children. He has a special room for you. We live in him. We move in him. We live, move, and have our being in him. You have a special place in his kingdom.

In this paragraph, he begins to explain the sermon's text proper. Again in expository fashion, he moves quickly from an explanation of the text to a proclamation to his hearers today. Notice how seamlessly he moves from a description of Paul's proclamation in the text ("And he told them that God created a special, unique place . . .") to a proclamation to the hearers today (" . . . for you in his heart. You are part of God's heart.") Notice also how he creates out of Paul's words of proclamation ("In him we live and move and have our being" Acts 17:28) his own words to proclaim the gospel to his hearers. In order to highlight these words for his hearers, Halche takes Paul's words and creates a cadence out of them for an extended meditation on the

meaning of the words: “We live in him. We move in him. We live, move, and have our being in him.” Notice also that Halche has a homiletical challenge before him. Paul’s preaching was to non-Christian Athenian hearers—a message that eventually ends in calling for their repentance (Acts 17:30–31). Many were evidently still secure in their sins because some of them mocked Paul’s message. While others invited Paul to come back, they nevertheless had not yet come to the point of crying out for a savior as in other places in Acts. However, Halche is preaching to hearers whom he can assume are already baptized Christians, because he is preaching to participants in the Multiethnic Symposium—a gathering for Christian ministry leaders. Of course, even these hearers need to hear the law, and he does this by preaching about the idols in Acts 17 and in our own day. Halche is aware that he is not preaching to secure sinners or to people who need to be awakened to their own sin. He thus follows Walther’s homiletical instruction for preaching to Christians.¹ Halche thus proclaims in the chapel the full, christocentric gospel meaning of Paul’s words which for Paul’s original hearers were only familiar words from one of their poets.

For the Gentiles, especially those resistant intellectually and religiously resistant Greeks to hear that they have a space in God’s generous heart was so sweet. So powerful. He shared the gospel with them and even telling them that God has done everything to protect your special place in his kingdom, in his heart. You’re protected by one of the mightiest and powerful events in the history of the universe, the resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus is risen, brothers and sisters. (Congregation responds: “He is risen, indeed!”) He is risen! Hallelujah. That is a game-changing plan of God. That changed everything and settles everything especially in the midst of all these bombarding but dead idols. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is risen. He is alive, and he resides in you. And he provided his church with this amazing, powerful gift, the gift of eternal life, the gift of resurrection. You are protected. That fellowship, that intimate fellowship between God and you is completely protected, governed by God himself as he made it evident in the resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. What a message and they wanted to hear preaching about this strange, but amazing, amazing, amazing gospel. And actually, some resistant intellectuals ended up being the followers of Jesus, because of this powerful proclamation of the gospel.

Here, Halche again pivots beautifully from describing in the third person the Pauline proclamation to proclaiming the good news of Christ directly to his hearers in the chapel. Notice, though, what kind of gospel Halche preaches. He does not leave the text behind when preaching Christ. Of course, Halche believes in the vicarious atonement of Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins, but this is not the particular proclamation that fits this text. In Acts 17:31, Paul’s christological

proclamation centers in Christ's resurrection, not his vicarious death. Again, Halche has this challenge before him because he is preaching on a sermon originally delivered to non-believing Christians and yet, Halche is preaching this text to Christians. Thus, instead of preaching the resurrection as evidence for the coming judgment of all people as Paul does, Halche proclaims the resurrection of Christ as a gift to his believing hearers. The proclamation of the resurrection is paired with the textual phrase "We live, move and have our being in him" and thus becomes in Halche's words, "He is alive, and he resides in you." Christ's resurrected life is the life that animates our living, moving, and being.

Methuselah, in the Bible, one of the longest lived human beings, was asked once, "How do you overcome? How do you silence all you adversaries?" You know the answer he gave? He says, "I overcome in silence all my adversaries by outliving them." By outliving them! Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega. Hallelujah. Amen. He is the eternal God in whom we can trust eternally. He outlives everybody. He outlives everything. We had a beautiful, interesting election few weeks or months back. I can tell you one thing Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. His gospel is eternal. We can rely on him. He outlives everything sometimes even religious structures like those idols. He lives in us, and he continues to do that in our life. The context here challenges us sometimes to get distressed and passionate about what's going on in the world. And the United States of America I came for school here and ended up going to Las Vegas and I observed many, many, many, many idols. My goodness, we are facing the same resistant culture to the gospel. Only 4 percent of millennials, 4 percent of millennials, are Bible-believing in the United States of America. One, two, three, four—it is so, so concerning. It is so depressing to us. The Apostle was distressed. It distresses us. That's one of the motivating factors for these missionaries to stay here with us and help us out by the grace of God and work together in this amazing great mission field. Four percent of millennials are Bible-believing according to various resources.

Here, Halche brings us back to the beginning of his sermon where Paul was pushed out of Thessalonica and Berea because of forces outside of his control. In the second paragraph of the sermon, Halche says that Paul landed in Athens "not by his own design." This wise preacher also knows that many people in the chapel that day had landed in America because of forces outside their own control. In January 2017 while the world was watching the Syrian refugee crisis play out across Europe, refugees and immigrants had become a major talking point in the presidential debates. Just two days after this sermon was preached, Executive Order 13769 was signed banning all refugees' entry into the United States. Halche takes

an issue that had become highly politicized and helps his Christian hearers, many of whom were themselves immigrants, to see themselves instead as missionaries called to imitate the missionary Paul. He even issues a call for these missionaries who have come to the United States to stay and help “us” (here, Halche speaks as an American to new Americans) to reach the millennial generation, only a small percentage of whom are Bible-believing Christians.

And about four-thousand churches in the United States of America closed their ministries every year. Four thousand! As a district mission leader one of the tasks I don't want to engage would be to do a liturgy on a church that is closing. It is ministry, and I cannot even do that kind of liturgy. Do you guys teach that kind of liturgy here? It's hard for me even to learn. How do you close the door of the gospel and tell people that we will no more preach the gospel here? Oh my goodness, that's very painful. Painful! The context challenges us to be again ignited by the love of Christ, touched by his love and to hit the streets for Jesus. Bond with everyone! Learn from them! Listen to them! Reason out with them if necessary but proclaim the sweet and powerful gospel that Jesus Christ is a loving and living God in our world.

*Brothers and sisters, the good news for us always is God still loves his people. He forgives sins. He provides a special room for you. Whether you come from Ethiopia or Liberia or Russia or even the United States of America, God has amazing heart place space for you. As one of the translators of the Bible version called *The Message* put it, the Apostle Paul actually told the church in Colossae, the Colossians, he told them that “God is so spacious.” Jesus is so roomy that every living creature will have its proper place in God without conflict without any problem. Everybody will have and get their own space in God's heart, in God's space, in God's kingdom. That's what made all of us to be part of this, this amazing grace and amazing gift.*

Dr. Halche's quotation from *The Message* is Colossians 1:19, “So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding.” The same verse is translated in the ESV as, “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” There has been much debate among biblical commentators concerning Colossians 1:19 and the meaning of the word *πλήρωμα*, translated as “fullness” in the ESV or “everything” in *The Message*. While commentators are agreed that its occurrence here does not mean the same thing as the use of the word in second-century Valentinian or other “gnostic” texts, there are a couple of possible meanings. One is that this verse is strictly speaking about the fullness of God's attributes and thus about the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. One commentator characterizes this word in its context as best

described by the theological concept of perichoresis, the indwelling of the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father (and the Spirit). This intertrinitarian explanation is not the way that The Message or our preacher understands Colossians 1. Another commentator broadens the meaning of the word in a long excursus in which he also examines similar passages such as Ephesians 1:10; 1:22–23; 3:19; 4:12–13 and 1 Corinthians 3:21–23. After this examination, he concludes “it appears that Christ is thought of as containing, representing, all that God is; and that the destiny of Christians, as the Body of Christ, is to enter, in him, into that wealth and completeness.” It is this broader understanding of this verse and particularly the implications for Christians that is utilized in Eugene Peterson’s Message and in Dr. Halche’s sermon.

I was born in a religiously diverse family in Ethiopia, South Ethiopia. My father was a Muslim. And my mother was a Coptic Orthodox Christian. The Lutheran missionaries from Norway brought the gospel to my mom. She was in the hospital setting. They preached the gospel to her in the hospital. She loved the gospel. So, she took me and my younger sister for baptism to the Lutheran Church of Ethiopia, Mekane Yesus. My father wasn't happy, of course. As a Muslim, Lutherans are taking his kids away from him. So, he came to the church to hinder my mom from letting us be baptized in the church. And the good thing was the timing was perfect. He got to the church when the pastor was preaching about the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from all our sins. So, he raised his hand. That was his first time to come to the church, and he doesn't know the rituals. So, he raised his hand and asked, "I am a Muslim and what are you preaching about the blood of Jesus, the free gift of forgiveness, the free gift of love of God through Christ Jesus applies to everybody including Muslims?" For the first time he heard the gospel that way. So, before you know it when the pastor was ready to baptize me and my younger sister, here my father comes and asks, "What is this?" And the pastor says, "This is the baptism I was talking about. Through this means you will be incorporated and you'll be part of the family of God." And he said, "Can I be baptized?" The pastor was so excited. But on the other hand, he said, "Okay, okay, you are an adult. We need to give you some instruction before we baptize you." So, my father is very determined that day. The Holy Spirit is working in his life, and he said, "Can you baptize me now and give me adult instruction later, please?" And the generous, gracious pastor did exactly what my father asked. He baptized him followed by me and my younger sister. The family came religiously divided like the West and East but went back to their home unified under the powerful blood and love of Jesus Christ. Glory be to his name. Hallelujah. God is good—all the time.

If a hearer were to question whether it was wise to baptize the Muslim father who so suddenly after hearing the gospel wanted baptism, it should be noted that Walther discusses this in his lectures on law and gospel. He says there that the practice of baptizing someone immediately after hearing the gospel but prior to full instruction is the “practice of the apostles” and the “Lutheran method” because it is the “biblical method.” The story helps Dr. Halche to illustrate how his sermon text and its dynamics still play out today. In Acts 17 missionary Paul brings the gospel to Greeks who are diametrically opposed in many ways to the Jews. Paul’s preaching is aimed at bringing his Greek hearers into the same body of Christ into which many Jews have already been baptized. As Dr. Halche tells the story of his family’s baptismal conversion which begins with Norwegian Lutherans and culminates with him, his sister, and his Muslim father all being baptized into Christ, he demonstrates that God is still at work through his word and sacraments to bring people into the faith and to reconcile them together.

Brothers and sisters, that is the love that pushed me and threw me and compelled me to cross how many oceans to come to the United States and share with you. Because for me, to be honest, my small village in south Ethiopia wasn't enough to share the love of Jesus. We claim the universe for Jesus. Amen? We claim this country for Jesus. We claim everybody for Jesus. That's why I needed a global platform, and the Lord brought me here to share the gospel with a beautiful denomination called The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Hallelujah. So, brothers and sisters, all of us here, God invites us today. He wants us to passionately engage with his love. Don't worry about those idols. Christ is risen and we have the hope of eternal life in the message of the gospel. Let's not be ashamed of the gospel. Let's move on and hit the road for Jesus. God is good! (The congregation responds, "All the time.") All the time. (The congregation responds, "God is good.") Amen.

Endnotes

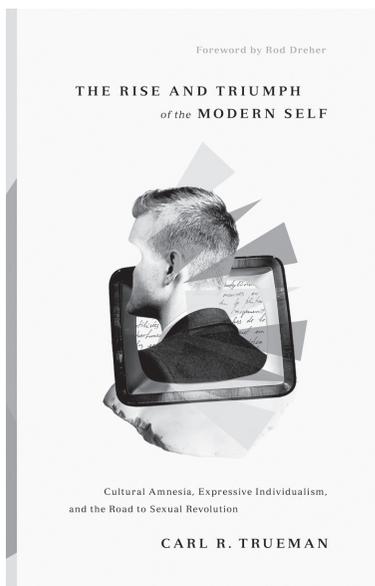
- 1 C. F. W. Walther, *Law and Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible*, A Reader's Edition (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010). See especially Theses 8 and 17.
- 2 Gerhard O. Forde, Mark C. Mattes, and Steven D. Paulson, *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*, Lutheran Quarterly Books (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1–9.
- 3 For more on christological proclamation and the many possibilities for preaching, especially for preaching the gospel of the resurrection of Christ, see Jeffrey Gibbs, “Filling in the Blanks on ‘Witness’: God Raised Jesus from the Dead,” in *Concordia Journal* 38 no. 2 (2012): 112–114; and David Maxwell, “The Resurrection of Christ: Its Importance in the History of the Church.” in *Concordia Journal* 34 (2008): 22–37.
- 4 For an exegetical treatment of this text with reflections for preaching in today's context, see Mark Seifrid, “Beyond Law and Gospel? Reflections on Speaking the Word In a (Post)modern World” *Concordia Journal* 43 (Winter/Spring 2017): 29–42.
- 5 This sermon was preached after the election of 2016 in which Donald J. Trump was elected the 45th president of the United States.
- 6 It is not clear the source of the citation for this millennial generation statistic. Other studies cite different proportions regarding millennial beliefs. Whatever the number, the evangelistic imperative remains urgent.
- 7 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/us/politics/trump-syrian-refugees.html>
- 8 Scot McKnight, *The Letter to the Colossians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 162.
- 9 C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (Cambridge, Eng.: University Press, 1957), 164–169.
- 10 Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 148.

Reviews

THE RISE AND TRIUMPH OF THE MODERN SELF: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution. By Carl R. Trueman. Crossway, 2020. Hardcover. 425 pages. \$34.99.

Ideas have consequences. The hackneyed axiom is true, of course, but tracing the links between the evident consequences and the ideas that we are certain must lie behind them is often not as easy as we assume. Making clear the connections between ivory-tower-ideas and the realities we see in our culture is the business of Carl Trueman in his formidable undertaking, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. He bites off an ambitious task indeed, but manages not only to master the material, but far more importantly, manages also to make mastery of the material possible for even an uninitiated reader.

This is a book about the Western world in which we live, the astounding revolution in that culture's sexual mores, and the foundational and powerful ideas at work driving and shaping that revolution. This is a book about philosophy, psychology, sociology, and the impact of all three on theology—though admittedly the final aspect is the most muted and intuitive, before it is made explicit in the parting thoughts of the final chapter. Beginning with the watershed work of three very different twentieth-century commentators of culture, Charles Taylor, Philip Rieff, and Alisdair MacIntyre, Trueman guides the reader into the depth of



their social critiques with a gentle hand and a clarity of style that is altogether refreshing and not a little surprising to anyone who has read the primary source material that occupies Trueman. He crafts sentences that are lucid, lively, and readily comprehensible. And for the sake of the reader less than familiar with the primary source material, he makes explicit and appropriately repetitious the key arguments and significance of each thinker. Only the most careless reader is going to miss the vital points or essential connections as the author unfolds his narrative.

It is a narrative, a true story, that has shaped our culture; that Trueman crafts his argument accordingly is a key to the success of the book. The author gives more than a succession of disparate accounts of key academics who contributed to our contemporary

Western (and increasingly worldwide) zeitgeist. Honoring the flow of the story, Trueman uses the insights and tools provided by Taylor, Rieff, and MacIntyre to connect the dots and reveal the linkages that exist from Rousseau through Shelley and Darwin to Marx, Freud, and then Marcuse, Singer, and finally, Bolz-Weber. Trueman explains his project as an effort to explore and understand “why a particular statement has come to be regarded as coherent and meaningful: ‘I am a woman trapped in a man’s body’” (19). The four-hundred pages that follow present the argument that is a story and make clear the deeper importance of this exploration: “the changes we have witnessed in the content and significance of sexual codes since the 1960s are symptomatic of deeper changes in how we think of the purpose of life, the meaning of happiness, and what actually constitutes people’s sense of who they are and what they are for” (23). In other words, this book is not just about sex; the implications of the story that Trueman tells are profound for every level of culture.

Some may consider the book’s length daunting, but readers are likely to discover that the story itself draws them forward and pages turn quickly as new light is shed on old names or foggy concepts first encountered in college or perhaps a seminary course. Indeed, this is an ideal text for those who have been hearing terms like *expressive individualist*, *psychological man*, *emotivism*, *the therapeutic*, or

normal nihilism thrown around but have been less than certain what to make of the terms or grasp why they matter. Trueman explains and consistently uses every term but the last and makes sense of the interrelationships. And while he doesn’t engage James Edwards, and so doesn’t adopt the term “normal nihilism,” all that is captured by that term is explored and explained with clarity in the pages of the text. If, by chance, you’ve once taken up a section of Rieff, or plowed through Nietzsche, Freud, or even MacIntyre only to remain more perplexed or bewildered than when you had begun, Trueman is ready and able to serve as your competent and patient guide. And there is a good chance that along the way he’ll introduce you to a few new characters you had yet to meet who nevertheless play significant supporting roles in the narrative that has shaped our world.

With some effort, I suspect I could conjure a few obligatory criticisms about Trueman’s book: an inaccurate intimation here, or an overlooked idea or thinker there, but such trivial complaints would be an injustice in so brief a review. The strengths of Trueman’s book overwhelm any nitpicking faults I could name. In fact, Trueman not only tells his story with style, thereby accomplishing his stated purpose, but he does it while striking almost exactly the right tone. There is no handwringing in this text, and no tirades or even hints of moral indignation. The sins of the culture are apparent enough without a flourish of outrage to prove

the moral rectitude of the writer. No, save a handful of deft critiques about the writing of some of his subjects, Trueman demonstrates a remarkable degree of longsuffering and academic fairness as he presents each character and development in his story. His harshest admonition he saves for those to whom he writes. “The task of the Christian,” Trueman declares, “is not to whine about the moment in which he or she lives but to understand its problems and respond appropriately to them” (30). Amen to that; such is the work of good theology. And true to his purpose, Trueman ably imparts precisely the understanding of the culture that is needed for that work. Any observer of culture who finds himself wondering or saying aloud, “*What* is going on in the world, today!” can find a wealth of answers waiting in Trueman’s account of the rise of the modern self.

Joel Biermann

ECCLESIOLOGY AND THEOSIS IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN. *By Andrew J. Byers. Cambridge University Press, 2017. Hardcover. 277 pages. \$96.50.*

The past twenty years have witnessed the emergence of an increasing number of church historians and New Testament exegetes who have eagerly identified in ecclesiastical and biblical authors elements of *theosis* (i.e., that human beings in Christ in some way become “gods”). Luther, Calvin, Augustine, Paul, and others have been made to represent their own versions of the teaching or, at

least, the theme. Byers’s monograph—his published dissertation—now extends the exercise to the Gospel of John. By carefully limiting his claims, Byers largely succeeds in depicting the Gospel as a narrative ecclesiology of corporate theosis.

The volume has three principle sections, each of which must work uphill against the weight of influential scholarship on John. Even before beginning those sections, Byers’s introduction warns that previous myopic emphases on Johannine Christology and supposed individualism have led to a neglect of the ecclesiology of the text. Furthermore, scholarly focus on the conjectured history of the Johannine community—a reconstruction of sectarian conflict and traumatic expulsion from the Jewish society—misled scholars into reading the Gospel as a cypher for past community experience rather than as a vision for present community identity, which, in turn, invited the reader into its embrace. Having argued for his ecclesiological and narrative perspective, Byers sets forth.

The first section in the body of the work focuses on the prologue of the Gospel (Jn 1:1–18). The principle takeaways here are that the divine identity allows for multiplicity (at this point the dyad of God and the Word, later to also include the Spirit), and that this multiplicity exhibits an openness to allow others into the divine “family.” By the end of the prologue, the Evangelist has “disambiguated” the community in familial terms articulated as the Father,

the Son, and the children of God. The birth of the children “from God” (1:12–13) depends on and arises from the incarnation of the Word (1:14). It is this divine filiation which carries the first and principle burden of Byers’s argument for Johannine *theosis*. In this, he gladly concurs with the exegetical conclusions of several of the church fathers. (I can affirm that Augustine especially favored defining deification in terms of John 1:14.)

In the second and shortest section, Byers argues for the significance of John’s theological use of “one.” He sees this as drawing first from the oneness of God as expressed in the Shema and then invoking the one messianic Shepherd and the one people of God of Ezekiel 34 and 37. With this alternate deployment of the “oneness” theme already found in Jewish identity, the Gospel correlates the one God, the one Shepherd, and the one flock in an association which actually points to a deeper ontological connectedness.

The ontological argument comes to the fore in the final section, which reads the Johannine ecclesiology in terms of participation and deification. Of these terms, the definition of participation is more consequential in that it “involves an ontological re-organization by which human participants in the divine interrelation actually become divine beings” (159). *Theosis* is more blandly defined as “sharing in God’s reality through Christ” (158). Byers appeals to a number of elements in the Gospel to defend this reading: from Jesus’s allusion

to humans named “gods” (Jn 10) to his prayer “that they may be one” (Jn 17) to the mimetic way in which various Gospel characters reflect Christ’s words and actions to the promise of the Spirit for recreating humanity. Again, Byers consciously follows the patristic lead in much of this reading.

Has Byers succeeded in his argument for a narrative and theotic ecclesiology in John’s Gospel? The evidence for an actual Johannine “doctrine of the church” as the new people of God gathered around Christ is strong. Indeed, the narrative approach not only traces this unfolding story but also provides surprising cogency to the claim that John would have included Christians as those to whom “the word [Word] of God came” and thus might be called “gods” (Jn 10:35). Of course, the Gospel itself never explicates this directly. Byers buttresses his argument by noting ways in which Christians come to participate in Christ’s words and works. In this, he misses, surprisingly, the participation in eternal life, a point so prominent among the church fathers. He also leaves this reader wondering how he would have integrated Jesus’s promise that his disciples would do “greater works” than he himself had done (Jn 14:12). More importantly, Byers rightly demarcates the derivative “divinity” of Christians from the exclusive “divine identity” of the Triune God. Without reference to the fathers in this case, his moves here follow the patristic lead once more.

In his conclusion, Byers expresses

his hope that his thesis might prove fruitful in the life of the church by offering a fresh perspective on Christian identity, now to be understood as enjoying a communal participant membership in the divine family. For this student of patristics, his work provides an intriguing apology that the church fathers, in their reading of John in terms of *theosis*, were not off the mark.

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**WHAT ARE BIBLICAL VALUES?:
What the Bible Says on Key Ethical
Issues.** By John J. Collins. Yale, 2019.
Hardcover. 285 pages. \$28.00.

In *What Are Biblical Values?* Hebrew scholar John J. Collins seeks to define biblical values through careful study of the Bible. First, Collins dismisses that the Bible can “speak.” Texts do not speak. People speak. Texts can allow for interpretations to be drawn, but the Bible, itself, cannot speak. Second, Collins does not assume the Bible consists of one unified theology. Instead, the Bible consists of several, sometimes competing, traditions. Third, the traditional interpretation of the Bible provides support for many practices abhorrent to modern society such as the institution of slavery, the subjugation of women, and the intolerance of diversity. Can modern audiences relate to the Scriptures written in antiquity? Collin’s

answer is both yes and no.

One ethical issue that Collins sees the Bible retaining relevancy is on the environment. While Collins sees several doctrines of creation woven through the traditions of the Scriptures, the care of creation is a central motif of both the Old and New Testaments. The anthropocentric view of creation is held in tension with the way creation is depicted in Job and Psalm 104 where each creature has intrinsic worth. The Old Testament laws on the conservation of land use, both in farming and in war, give witness to a strong theology for the care of creation in Israel. While Collins considers the apocalyptic expectation weakening the desire to care for creation, the cosmic Christ of Colossians 1 and the garden in Revelation 22 both uphold the goodness and centrality of creation in the New Testament. The detachment of Jesus does not give disciples of Jesus the excuse to “rape the planet” (125).

While the Bible is relevant in ongoing discussions on the environment, Collins sees the Bible as irrelevant in discussions involving gender and sexuality. Antiquity did not have the modern categories of heterosexual or homosexual. Collins cites Plato’s *Symposium* which speaks of primeval humans as four-armed, two-headed, round creatures. Zeus divided humanity into two parts with each part having desire for the other half. While this was the view of the Greeks, Collins admits that it finds no support in how Eve was created from Adam. Greeks saw attraction to the same half as imbuing

strength and ability whereas the Bible conveys the complimentary nature of man and woman. The New Testament's language for homosexual behavior does not endorse gay rights (81). Working around the injunctions against homosexual behavior, Collins appeals to love of neighbor and cultural context to get around the irrelevance of the Bible's ethics on sexuality.

The struggle for Collins is in extricating himself from tradition while still affirming the Bible in discussions on ethics. Collins seems to strain to make the Bible relevant to justify the Bible's voice in academia. While Collins largely succeeds, the ever-changing culture may render even this book irrelevant soon. The greatest contribution Collins gives to readers is what can and cannot be inferred from biblical texts as literature. For pastors, this book is an important reminder that proof-texting and biblicism does not win debates or converts. Collins only speaks as to what is in the text which can lead to many valid interpretations. Only the Holy Spirit illuminating our hearts and minds opens the Scriptures to us so they may be read to benefit faith.

The Bible is only relevant because of the tradition passed down in communities of faith. Ethical decisions drawn from the Scriptures always occurs in the community. While the Bible can support any ethical position on any topic as Collins rightly notes, the rule of faith for Christians must guide the ethical implications of any text in Scripture. This book is both challenging

and rewarding to any student of biblical studies. Easy to read, concise, and engaging, I recommend *What Are Biblical Values?* to pastors wanting to know what current biblical scholarship says on interpreting the Bible and ethical topics.

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THE LETTER AND SPIRIT OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: From the Early Church to Modern Practice. By Keith D. Stanglin. Baker Academic, 2018. Paper. 288 pages. \$26.99.

As student of the history of exegesis, I long for a helpful introductory guide of biblical interpretation which could stand somewhere between Grant's *A Short History of the Interpretation of The Bible* and Watson's and Hauser's multivolume series *A History of Biblical Interpretation*. That is to say: I am looking for a book through which I can take hold of the key developments of the history of biblical interpretation in a one-week reading setting without digressing into the erudite yet verbose information of each historical period. In this respect, Stanglin's *The Letter and Spirit of Biblical Interpretation* ideally fits my aim.

This book consists of two parts. The first part is the descriptive introduction of the history of biblical interpretation from the earliest Christian exegesis to our modern days. The second part is the

prescriptive investigation of asking to what extent we can retrieve the practice of pre-modern exegesis without losing grip of the advances of the modern historical-critical approach. The key concern of this book is not to promote one sort of exegetical tradition at the expense of the other. Rather, as Stanglin contends in his introduction, the basic motive question for this study is “what can we learn from *both* premodern and modern approaches to Scripture?” (8). The implication of this question is that we can *actually* learn something from both traditions, and more importantly, there is actually common ground or a share of concerns between them.

The first part is further divided into five chapters. Chapter 2 discusses the earliest Christian exegesis. Stanglin traces the footprints of exegetical works of the apostolic fathers of the second century, the generation adjacently next to the apostles. The hermeneutical significance of this time is that the Christ event was given supreme hermeneutical priority (21). The Jewish Scripture should be probed in light of Christ. The exegetical practices of this time were varied, but the unifying assumption for all Christian writers of this time remained that all christological readings serve that theme of fulfillment (23). Irenaeus, in response to Marcion and Gnostics, further provided two exegetical tools to foster his hermeneutical, namely, typology and *regula fidei*. Typology is the intertextual play between type and antitype which shows the fundamental unity between the two testaments (31). And *regula*

fidei, the rule of faith, serves for Irenaeus as the plot summary of the Scripture centered on salvific action of the Triune God in history (33). With the efforts of the apostolic fathers, the basic contours of Christian exegesis were laid out as a framework independent of the Jewish exegetical tradition.

Turning to the next chronological period, chapter 3 discusses the exegetical development of the third and fourth centuries, with a special focus on the Greek-speaking theologians. The key figure of this period was, for sure, Origen. Origen further schematized the existing twofold sense into his threefold mode of interpretation. Origen interprets the Scripture in a tripartite way, where the bodily sense stands for literal meaning, the soulish sense moral understanding, and the spiritual sense mystical notion (54). In the eyes of modern exegetes, Origen was the chief culprit responsible for this notorious “allegorical approach.” But Stanglin fairly comments that, first of all, Origen was an important literal critic in antiquity. Also, Origen’s method was not his idiosyncratic invention. He simply followed what his predecessors did for years. Third, for Origen, Christ is always the unifying thread of the Old Testament. Finally, Origen recognizes the necessary exegetical boundaries in his use of allegory (62–63). Stanglin also briefly introduces the Antiochene interpretation. Despite their emphasis on the literal sense, the Antiochene exegetes still leave room for allegory. What the Antiochene called for was

not a total rejection of allegory, but a careful elaboration of the spiritual sense (*theoria*) which is built on the basis of literal notion (65).

Chapter 4 focuses on the medieval exegesis of the Latin West from the time of Augustine through Nicholas of Lyra of the fourteenth century. Except for Augustine, who himself was often regarded as not a medieval theologian but the great patristic author, the medieval exegesis is indeed a relatively unnoticed area among Protestant academia. Five authors were picked by Stanglin in his reconstruction of medieval exegesis: Augustine, John Cassian, Gregory the Great, Aquinas, and Lyra. In short, we witnessed the further systematization of the threefold mode of interpretation into *Quadrigena*, the fourfold sense of Scripture. With the rise of the Victorine school and Scholasticism during the high Middle Ages, a renewed interest on the literal sense was fostered. But in the meantime, exegesis and theology began to breach as two separated disciplines (102).

Chapter 5 records the shift of exegetical contours in the early modern period. With the rise of Renaissance humanism in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the exegetes of this period now turned their attention to the original languages and the historical settings of the text. Some of the key exegetes of this era, like Erasmus, Luther, and Calvin, were introduced, and the author ends this chapter with the presentation of Post-Reformation Orthodoxies. In brief, the exegetes

of this period tend to show a greater appreciation toward the “letter” of the text with the growing interest on grammar, human authorial intention, and the historical context while downplaying the role of allegorization.

Chapter 6 offers the account of the rise of historical-critical exegesis which I suggest is the best chapter of the first part. Two ideas in Stanglin’s eye are seen as the cornerstones of modern exegesis: the perspicuity of the Scripture, and the priority of the literal sense. For the late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestant exegetes, their concept of “the perspicuity of the Scripture” diverged from the Reformers in a way that perspicuity now meant the text is clear to every reader equipped with common reason (157). Reading the Scripture then became a pure rational activity. And the second idea, the priority of the literal sense, leaves no room for spiritual elaboration. Literal sense was made equivalent to the original sense, and the only legitimate question in the pursuit of exegesis is “what does the text mean?” rather than “what does the text mean *for us*?” The interest of the whole hermeneutical enterprise critically shifted from the text itself to what is *behind* the text.

In the second part, Stanglin returns to his chief objective of this book, namely, to explore the possibility of reconciling the two apparently incompatible approaches. The author argues that, negatively, the real problem is not so much either allegory or historical-criticism itself as the extremity

in the use of each method (195). When allegory is severed from the plain literal sense in its historical context, or when historical-criticism excludes the need for faith, the method becomes problematic. Positively, Stanglin calls for proper controls of these two approaches. Any use of allegory should always first be built upon the literal sense, then further limited by the principles of *analogia Scripturae* and *analogia fidei* (206). For historical-criticism, there should be legitimate room for spiritual elaboration. The unity and divine authorship of Scripture should never be undermined. Finally, interpretive humility should be practiced by every historical critic (208–209).

Despite many advantages which I have taken from this book, some observations can be made as my final comments:

1. Few authors would have equal expertise in every period of history of exegesis. Stanglin seems no exception. The account of the twelfth-century Victorines is unduly brief. The Victorine school was seen as the turning point of medieval exegesis that paved the way of the re-appreciation of the literal sense and thus is worthy of better treatment.
2. In his attempt to reconcile the two broad approaches, Stanglin seems to overlook the question of the nature of the Scripture for the premodern exegetes until the very end of his book. For the pre-modern exegetes,

it is the sacramentality of the Scripture which legitimizes their use of allegory. For them, the true realm of meaning lies Platonically over the “letter,” thus the literal sense is merely the platform from which they can spring into the deeper, divine realm of truth. But for modern exegetes, in the words of Hans Frei, the text is a realistic or history-like narrative, and accordingly the quest of interpretation becomes nothing but the reconstruction of the original historical setting. How could/do we reconcile these two exegetical approaches without neglecting the profound difference with respect to their corresponding ontological premises? For this question, I would say J. Todd Billings’s *The Word of God for the People of God* offers invaluable insight and thus may be seen as a helpful complement to Stanglin’s work.

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**THE THEOLOGY OF LIBERALISM:
Political Philosophy and the
Justice of God.** By Eric Nelson.
Harvard, 2019. Hardcover. 352 pages.
\$29.95.

In the modern American political paradigm, to be a liberal either means to be a left-libertarian, a progressive, or to be a right-libertarian, a classical liberal. A progressive liberal views substantive

inequality as the accidental byproduct of arbitrary and moral consequences. The goal for the government for a progressive is to correct these inequalities through distributive justice—even if this justice comes at the expense of individual autonomy or personal merit. A classical liberal views the role of the government as safeguarding individual (negative) liberty and unconstrained individual autonomy. Jonathan Haidt in his book *The Righteous Mind* casts this as a battle over two moral foundations: care versus liberty. The question for modern liberals is this: can equality and liberty belong together?

In *The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God*, Eric Nelson attempts to answer this Gordian knot by tracing the political philosophy of liberalism back to the fifth-century debates between Augustine and Pelagius. In his confrontation with Augustine, Pelagius attempted to demonstrate the justice of God by asserting the goodness of man. For Pelagius, humans are born with free will and can only be accountable for their own personal sins and not the sins of others. For example, Adam's sin in the garden of Eden was his responsibility not ours. In Pelagius's arguments, Augustine saw the doctrine of the atonement under attack. Augustine would assert the atonement was necessary because all of humanity was in need of salvation. Sin was an inheritance of the rebellion of Adam. Pelagius sought to preserve God's justice while Augustine sought to protect the need for the atonement. In the end, for the most part,

Augustine won the debate.

What does this fifth-century theological debate have to do with the Enlightenment? Nelson argues that the chief thinkers of the Enlightenment were forced to revisit the Pelagian Controversy as new political theories of governance were forming in the seventeenth century. By the time of the Enlightenment, two theories of government legitimacy emerged. First, the Representation Theory advanced by the Parliamentarians saw Adam as a type for the human race that acted on behalf of the whole. Their argument was that the representatives of Parliament acted on behalf of their constituents as Adam did for the human race. Representation Theory was firmly grounded in Augustinian thought and provided legitimacy for the government.

Second, the Royalist Theory, backed by John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, argued that representation was inconsequential to the legitimacy of the government. Instead, government was authorized to act through institutions. The Royalist Theory of authorization meant that Adam acting as his own free agent was not authorized to act on behalf of the entire human race. Adam's unborn children as their own free agents did not authorize him to act on their behalf. For example, parliament could not act as representatives of their constituents without authorization to do so. The Pelagian consequences of the Royalist Theory, with its denial of original sin, would go on to form the basis of modern political liberalism—

free autonomous individuals giving authorization to governing institutions. In the twentieth century, the Pelagian foundations of liberalism would be challenged accidentally by John Rawls and his most influential work: *A Political Theory of Justice*.

Graduating Princeton in 1943, Rawls intended to become an Episcopalian priest. Because of the experiences he endured in World War II, Rawls lost his faith. However, while Rawls lost his belief in Jesus Christ, his formative experiences at Princeton continued to unknowingly shape his entire worldview. Rawls's undergraduate thesis took the Augustinian position on human agency against the Pelagian view of human freedom and self-justification. In Rawls's view, Pelagianism "rendered the cross of Christ to no effect." Rawls refuted the very concepts of human merit as synonymous with self-idolization. Good did not come from human works but God alone.

While Rawls's Christian faith died in World War II, his anti-Pelagian position lived on into his academic career. His rejection of merit survived his crisis of faith and emerged as one of his best known political concepts in *A Theory of Justice*—the theory of moral arbitrariness. The theory of moral arbitrariness seeks to solve the problem of the unequal distribution of goods and services. Individuals who through their own achievement have produced a greater share of goods and services due to their natural talent, intellect, creativity, personality, or even work ethic

are not morally entitled to a greater share of those goods and services as a result, because the various characteristics stated were not earned or deserved. From this point of view, all production capabilities of individuals and the ability to receive goods and services arises "arbitrary from a moral point of view." The Rawlsian state seeks to alleviate these natural discrepancies through the redistribution of goods and services.

In this role of addressing natural advantages and inequalities, the state becomes God, providing for social order, distributive justice, and divine grace. Rawls's secularization of anti-Pelagianism is in stark contrast to the Pelagian forbearers of liberalism where the state exists only to protect individual liberties. While wanting to agree with the goals of left-libertarians, Nelson ultimately sides with the right-libertarians in what constitutes a coherent and just society. Natural inequalities, even those arising from systemic circumstances, will always exist and cannot be eliminated. The problem with Rawls and "luck egalitarians" is that the state is a poor substitute for God. God is all knowing and all powerful while the state is limited by its creatureliness. The state cannot quantize all variables in what would make humans equal. In order to achieve Rawls's vision, humanity must be essentially redefined genetically or institutionally to achieve true equality. While the book could have used tighter editing in the latter chapters, I recommend this book to pastors and thought leaders as a coherent intellectual

attempt to address the challenges arising
from left-libertarianism.

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