

FALL 2022 | VOLUME 48 | NUMBER 4

concordia journal



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

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

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

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A Concordia Seminary St. Louis Publication



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Editor's Note

The church today has been talking a lot about culture, perhaps more than it ever has before. Richard Niebuhr's 1951 *Christ and Culture* placed the topic into the church's theological reflection in both academic and more popular levels. But those seventy years since Niebuhr have seen enormous changes and the question of the church and culture has shifted, become more urgent, and more volatile. We hear sanguine phrases like "cultural engagement" and "cultural diversity" but also the more contentious "counter-cultural," "toxic culture," "culture wars," "cancel culture." The problem with these phrases is that they do not lead us to a better theological understanding of culture; instead, they have increasingly become dog-whistles to mobilize, protest, and scream. The result is that the relationship of the church to culture is getting less and less careful attention.

Systematic professor, Joel Okamoto, has been thinking about and working on theological understandings of culture for quite some time. In this issue, Okamoto gives us an orientation into understanding and handling questions of culture. Particularly helpful is the distinction between "culture in the descriptive sense" and "culture in the evaluative sense" as Okamoto navigates the scope and impact of culture, as "cosmopolitan" (that is, culture that finds a home throughout the world, across traditional boundaries), and "popular."

Regarding popular culture, aka "pop-culture," Joshua Hollmann, professor at Concordia University, St. Paul, offers an analysis and a possible Christian approach. Like the cover's homage to Roy Lichtenstein's pop-art, popular culture is both playful and ephemeral—the cheap ink and paper of colored newspaper comics evinces pop culture's vividness and transitoriness—the attention it demands is all-consuming, but brief and fleeting. Yet Hollmann gives us a way to see pop culture and engage it through another lens, the traditional lens of natural theology: "Popular culture is the relevant and relatable way that the questions and quixotic pursuits of natural theology as the contemporary spiritual quest for human flourishing and meaning are articulated and visualized. While millions of North Americans eschew church and organized religion, they daily engage in various forms of popular culture. Classical loci of natural theology such as goodness, wisdom, and telos, are imagined, experienced, and expressed through pop culture narratives of meanings, rituals of community, and rites of passage" (Hollmann, p. 50).

One of the most dominant and influential forms of popular culture is film

and movies. Film is a popular cultural medium that shapes our society in both personal and public ways. Sometimes this medium reinforces or deepens themes that Christians value. Other times it challenges or undermines the Christian view of the world. In this issue, David Lewis's article "Christ in Film," covers one aspect of this intersection: the Christ-film. Lewis deals with both films *about* Christ, like *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) or *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1987), and films with "Christ-figures," like *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *Gran Torino* (2008), or the *The Matrix* (1999). For Lewis, "both Jesus-films and Christ-figure films provide a window into our American popular culture. What do many of our neighbors actually think and believe about our Lord Jesus Christ and his mission?" But they also become a possible point of meeting between the Christian and non-Christian, a meeting place where the Christian can speak the gospel and bear witness to the true Christ who brings new life.

In the last several years, we have begun an effort in cultural engagement and theological analysis of movies in our January Faith and Film Festival. We had a few starts and stops with the interruptions of the pandemic, but we are excited to host this again this coming January 2023. The festival allows Christians to gather and reflect on themes of redemption, reconciliation, mercy and grace in a broad variety of movies with the hope that we can better see and point to "the great love with which God has loved us" (Eph 2:4).

Erik H. Herrmann
Dean of Theological Research and Publications

In Memoriam

Arthur Frederick Graudin

On June 18, 2022, Dr. Arthur Graudin departed to be with Christ his Lord. He served the church as pastor, professor, and in other endeavors of churchmanship. “In the Master’s service” came to be his common closing in correspondence, and that is a beautiful summary of his career and life.

He attended Boston Latin School, Concordia Collegiate Institute of Bronxville, NY and Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He obtained a Master of Divinity from the seminary (1956) and later (1972) a Doctor of Religion degree from the Claremont School of Theology. He was a missionary at-large in Marion, Indiana, and later also in Claremont, California. He served as pastor at St. James, Marion, Indiana (1950–1951); Beautiful Savior, Mequon, Wisconsin; Swissvale, Pennsylvania (1958–1961); and St. Luke, Claremont (1965–1974). Over the years he held positions at Concordia University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (teacher) and Concordia Teachers College, Seward, Nebraska (teacher, dean of students). In 1974, he began serving at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in various roles: associate professor of exegetical theology and placement counselor; director of Resident Field Education (1978–1981, acting director 1984–1985); acting dean of student life (1981–1983); and in 1989, acting director of vicarage. In 1997 he became professor emeritus and then taught and preached occasionally, attending the Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus regularly, as he was able, for his own edification.

Other areas of Dr. Graudin’s service to the church included the Commission on Church Literature, the Advisory Committee on Doctrine and Conciliation, the Commission on Doctrinal Review, as well as his book reviews and other writings.

In 1949 he was married to Marlyn Bangert. Their sixty-six years together were a shining example of Christian marriage to the people of the congregations and campus communities with which they were associated. They worked unitedly to serve the congregants and the students, for whom they had great affection and concern. A common sight was Mrs. Graudin seated in the chapel before the service, to have an opportunity to talk with gathering students, before going into the nave to join her husband. She was a beloved figure in the campus community, which honored her for her work, especially in connection with the seminary Re-Sell-It Shop. During the final years of her life Arthur was her devoted, patient caregiver in her illness. She passed away in 2015.

Our friend Arthur (I will not use the diminutive “Art,” commonly used when

talking with him), was well known for his orthodox stance, based on careful, scholarly study of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions (he wrote an essay for the *Concordia Journal*, called “The Lutheran Confessions and the Old Testament”). Our brief tribute to him in what follows is based on what he wrote and preached and conversations with him.

Arthur’s orthodox approach was an important part of his testimony. He insisted that a churchman must know the truth and persist in it. This was apparent, for example, in his interviews with students for certification for the ministry, and his book reviews in the *Concordia Journal*. But while he faithfully pointed out errors in teaching and understanding, it was an evenhanded criticism, in which he also indicated points where he was in agreement with speakers or writers with whom he still had to take issue on certain items. This is certainly a good example worthy of imitation by all who undertake the task of criticism.

So, for instance, in a review of a book on Genesis he rejected the historical-critical methodology, which treated the Bible as a merely human book but expressed admiration of the honesty of the author in not concealing his presuppositions or neglecting to recognize alternative interpretations. Again, a review of a book on Jeremiah noted errors such as advocating prayer as a means of grace, neo-pentecostalism, and synergism. Nevertheless, the review saw value in the author’s encouragement of regular and methodological study of God’s word. Another review judged a study guide to be not recommended for use by LCMS readers because of its millennialism and an improper understanding of Old Testament Israel in its relationship to the Israel of the New Testament. But, it goes on, there are commendable features, such as an inductive approach to Bible study and an invitation to go directly to Scripture.

Similarly, a review of a book on the minor prophets found many “nuggets” of insight in it but rejected its millennialism and dispensationalism and suggested other books which “probably would be of more value to the readers of this journal.” And a review of a Roman Catholic commentary on Ezekiel noted that many helpful insights and items of information could be derived from it and yet rejected its historical-critical methodology. But Arthur, as a good and patient teacher, made suggestions for improvements which would have been helpful to the readers for making their own conclusions, such as precise definitions of terminology like “myths,” “inspired,” and “canonical,” and inclusion of an index of pertinent Bible passages.

We can mention that a review of a book on Genesis by a Wisconsin Synod author commended the strong points, such as the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture, and Mosaic authorship, and called it a helpful introduction to the study of Genesis, but indicated some inaccuracies, such as references to “deficiencies” in God’s original creation and claiming that every instance of the Hebrew verb “to create” has God as the subject. A final example: A *Concordia Journal* Homiletical Help for preparation of a sermon on John 1:29–41 called for explanations of certain titles of

Jesus (Lamb of God, Son of God, Messiah) to apply the remedy for sin needed by human beings. Arthur pointed out that the text shows that it would be wrong to assert (as some do) that Jesus was not the Son of God until the time of his baptism.

In various places Arthur indicated some basic principles which undergird the orthodox use of Scriptures. For example, a review of Volume 11 of the American Edition of Luther's Works in the *Concordia Journal* draws attention to Luther's use of three key hermeneutical principles: the unity of the Old and New Testaments, the New Testament as interpreting the Old Testament, and Christology as the overarching and unifying theme in the Bible. And in the course of criticizing a certain book's errors Arthur highly recommended the book's own statement of the principle endorsed by Acts 17:11, which it ought to have more fully applied to itself.

Arthur's book *Mark's Portrait of Jesus as Teacher* (1972) is his thesis for his doctorate from Claremont. It was the result of much study and thought, and at least two major emphases in it may be mentioned: (1) Jesus as the center of teacher and theology, and (2) knowledge of how to teach the biblical truth, in imitation of the Master's teaching, on the basis of which he and his fellow pastors should proceed. Examples of this orientation abound in his own teaching and preaching and his Homiletical Helps in the *Concordia Journal* for sermon preparation. For instance, in one for an Advent sermon on Philippians 4:4-7 (which appears to me to be his first Homiletical Helps contribution), he outlines a sermon proclaiming the peace and joy to be found in celebrating the coming of Jesus Christ as Redeemer, Judge, and King and anticipating his promised return. He presents this as a feature of life "in the Lord," drawing upon the repeated use of that phrase in the text and context of the Philippians passage, as well as other biblical statements about Christ. It can also be pointed out that the sermon is to relate the message to Christ as Savior and substitute for sinners, which is done in some form of this treatment or variation of it in every one of Arthur's Homiletical Helps or chapel sermons.

Many more examples of Christ-related and Christocentric preaching and service could be given. But let one suffice, taken from a sermon of April 27, 1997, based on a theme much loved by Arthur (namely, the Good Shepherd) and appropriately quoted at his funeral. It proclaims: "Christ's under-shepherds must first be sheep whom Jesus has sought out and invited to follow him." Every pastor's ministry, then, is to continue this gracious invitation to come and live in this happy relationship, which the pastor himself so much cherishes.

He is still in the service of the Master, who says to him, "Well done!" and invites him into joy. We praise the Lord and share the hope of that experience.

Thomas Manteufel
Professor Emeritus

Articles

How Culture Matters

Joel Okamoto



Joel P. Okamoto occupies the Waldemar and Mary Griesbach Chair in Systematic Theology and is chair of the department of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, Missouri.

Many Christians in the United States cannot avoid thinking about and dealing with culture. Some find satisfaction and even pleasure from thinking about and dealing with culture. They wake up every morning and get the newspapers, turn on the radio, or check their social

media and their favorite websites. Others, however, would rather not think about it and wish it would all go away. In any case, there it is. This is just the way the world is right now. Culture is unavoidable.

Were to you ask different people how culture matters, or why we should care about culture, or simply what culture is, you would get a wide range of answers. Many would be vague or cryptic. This outcome should not surprise anyone. Words like “politics,” “economics,” and “science” stand for so much for so many that most people would agree they are important. But asking straightforward questions like “What is politics?” or “How does science work?” would elicit a wide range of answers. Many would be vague or cryptic. It is one thing to think about political matters, questions, and disagreements, but another to think about politics itself. It is the same way with culture.

Still, there is a difference with culture. At least since the Second World War, concerns about the idea of culture have been prominent and explicit. In 1948, Josef Pieper published *Musse und Kult*, published four years later in English as *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. He argued that it was time for “reorganizing our intellectual and moral and spiritual assets.”¹ But this clearly important task required first considering nothing less than the foundations of Western culture. His book was devoted

to arguing that *leisure* was one of those foundations. In 1949 T. S. Eliot published *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*. This book followed his 1939 book *The Idea of a Christian Society*, in which he was concerned to answer the questions, “What—if any—is the ‘idea’ of the society in which we live? to what end is it arranged?” Now he was exploring a more basic idea, one about the notion of a culture. He had observed “with growing anxiety the career of this word *culture* during the past six or seven years.”² In 1951, H. Richard Niebuhr published *Christ and Culture*. He had observed how the ongoing debate about how Christianity related to culture was “as confused as it is many-sided.” “So many voices are heard,” he wrote, “so many confident but diverse assertions about the Christian answer to the social problem are being made, so many issues are raised, that bewilderment and uncertainty beset many Christians.”³

Looking back over the past seventy years, we can see that the same interests and concerns have endured. A fresh translation marked the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Leisure*, and several years later cultural critic Curtis White alluded to and acknowledged *Leisure* by referring the “culture of total work” in the subtitle of his book *The Spirit of Disobedience*.⁴ In 1971 George Steiner published *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, whose subtitle is *Some Notes towards the Redefinition of Culture*, and in 2015

Culture, that is to say, was becoming the most general term used for identifying and distinguishing people and their lives.

Notes on the Death of Culture, the English translation of a collection of essays by Mario Vargas Llosa appeared.⁵ The allusion to Eliot’s book was apt. In the introduction, Vargas Llosa observed, “It is very likely that never in human history have there been as many treatises, essays, theories and analyses focused on culture as there are today. This fact is even more surprising given that culture, in the

meaning traditionally ascribed to the term, is now on the point of disappearing.”⁶ He used Eliot to stand for the traditional ascription, noting that his book “seems to refer to a very remote era, without any connection to the present.”⁷ As for Niebuhr, his words about the debate over culture being “as confused as it is many-sided” still are true today, and they still serve as a clear statement of the reason for Christians to be concerned about “culture,” including what it means and how it matters.

Books like Pieper’s, Eliot’s, and Niebuhr’s did not inaugurate discussions about culture, but they did mark an inflection point. These books reflect a time when culture itself became the widely accepted term under which all values, goals, and endeavors of groups of human beings would be gathered. Culture, that is to say, was becoming the most general term used for identifying and distinguishing people and their lives. Religion, politics, class, wealth, race, sex, gender, family, society, location, vocations,

avocations, and diversions are also words for identifying and distinguishing people. But all of them can also be classified as “cultural.” You can distinguish Christian culture and Confucian culture. You may speak of “cultural issues” in our politics, including class, wealth, race, sex, gender, and family. There are versions of “American culture” and of “European culture.” You may have chosen your job because of the company’s strong “corporate culture,” or you may have gotten out of a company because you deplored its “culture of greed.” You may delight in the “musical culture” you wish you have more time for, and at the same time you may be discouraged by the “culture of the clubhouse” that permeates your favorite baseball team.

There has been nothing inevitable about this development. For a time, “culture” and “civilization” were interchangeable. When E. B. Tylor gave his influential definition of culture, he actually wrote, “Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense . . .”⁸ The title of the German original version of Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* is *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*. Eliot did not attempt to distinguish the two words, while Niebuhr’s opening chapter uses the two words interchangeably until he turns to the task of defining “culture” for his study. But today, a clearer distinction has settled in. Nowadays, “civilization” often refers to a certain kind of culture, or a culture with certain characteristics.⁹ Another word or set of words will probably replace “culture” in the future. For now, however, culture is the word used most commonly to speak about how to identify or distinguish people and their lives in some general way.

By itself, the fact that culture has become a most general descriptor is not very important unless anthropology is your interest. But “culture” also become the word used to sum up the hopes for, the interests in, the concerns for, and the despairs over *ourselves* and *our* lives. The cultural anthropologist regards the culture she is trying to interpret *disinterestedly*. It is different when she goes to church and is frustrated that so many sermons take sides on topics like race, climate change, and gender. She complains to her husband that she doesn’t like all the references to *cultural* matters in sermons, she doesn’t agree with many of the positions the preacher takes, and she can’t stand his tone. They are matters by which *she* identifies and distinguishes herself with and among others. She takes a personal interest. She has something at stake. The difference here is that culture is something to be *described* for the anthropologist as anthropologist, but culture is something *valuable* for the anthropologist as worshipper.

Raymond Williams persuasively explains how these two ways of thinking about culture are, above all, the results of two developments in England beginning in the late-eighteenth century that were coming together in the mid-twentieth century. He explained, “Two important traditions were finding in England their effective formations: in the study of literature a decisive dominance of an idea of criticism which, from Arnold to Leavis, had *culture* as one of its central terms; and in discussions of society the extension to general conversation of an anthropological

sense which had been clear as a specialist but now . . . was becoming naturalized.”¹⁰

In the first tradition, culture became a key word to address concerns about how the Industrial Revolution and the advent of democracy were drastically altering English society.¹¹ A stream of literature speaking about these concerns arose before the term “culture” was adopted, which happened when Matthew Arnold published *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* in 1869.¹² Arnold defined culture as “the study and pursuit of perfection,” and that the main characters or features of perfection are “beauty and intelligence, or, in other words, sweetness and light” (81). He feared that the rise of industries and the reforms toward democracy were leading England into “anarchy.” By this he meant a condition where worship would be “of freedom in and of itself” and this worship would spring from the “superstitious faith, as I say, in machinery” (84). For Arnold, true perfection requires spiritual perfection, but the machine and democracy threatened to replace that ideal altogether with the ideal of “doing as one likes.” Arnold was especially concerned with the Philistine, “For *Philistine* gives the notion of particularly stiff-necked and perverse in the resistance to light and its children,” and he identified especially the middle class with this: “therein it specially suits our middle class, who not only do not pursue sweetness and light, but who even prefer to them that sort of machinery of business, chapels, tea-meetings and addresses from Mr. Murphy, which makes up the dismal and illiberal life on which I have so often touched” (105).¹³ Arnold drew a sharp distinction between the material and the bodily on the one hand and the spiritual on the other hand. Only through spiritual perfection could there be personal and social perfection. “But culture, which is the study of perfection, leads us . . . to conceive of true human perfection as a *harmonious* perfection, developing all sides of our humanity; and as a *general* perfection, developing all parts of our society” (192). Otherwise, there would be anarchy, “For if one member suffer, the other members must suffer with it; and the fewer there are that follow the true way of salvation, the harder that way is to find” (192).

Arnold’s essay has been very influential. Gerald Graff, in a commentary for a 1994 edition of Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*, observed that this book

has virtually been rewritten every decade. Notable twentieth-century restatements include Irving Babbitt’s *Literature and the American College* (1908), Julien Benda’s *The Treason of the Intellectuals* (1928), José Ortega y Gasset’s *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930), T. S. Eliot’s *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1940) and *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* (1949), and Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979). Since the late 1980s, rewritings of Arnold’s argument seem to appear annually. Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) was followed by Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radicals* (1990), Martin Anderson’s *imposters in*

the Temple (1992), and Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Disuniting of America* (1991). For the culture-and-anarchy boom, no end seems to be in sight.¹⁴

To be sure, the arguments of these books did differ. For example, just the titles *The Treason of the Intellectuals* and *The Revolt of the Masses* suggest two very different theses about the breakdown of the societies they were concerned with. But all of them, along with a mass of other books, essays, sermons, Bible studies, blog posts, and podcasts, assumed that the personal and social well-being were only possible with the actual pursuit of being good (whatever that means), and all of them feared that conditions favorable for doing this were either threatened or disappearing.

The second tradition in the modern development of the word “culture” originated a few years after *Culture and Anarchy* when E. B. Tylor’s first edition of *Primitive Culture* was published. Tylor defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”¹⁵ Clifford Geertz, in his own very influential book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, referred to this concept as one of those “ideas [that] burst upon the intellectual landscape with a tremendous force” and said that “the whole discipline of anthropology arose” around it.¹⁶ Although the concept by itself proved theoretically too unwieldy, its influence in making culture as a “complex whole” as a key way to understand oneself and others has reached well beyond the discipline of anthropology. Niebuhr, for example, was clear and explicit in drawing on this for his definition of “culture”: “that total process of human activity and that total result of such activity . . . It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values.”¹⁷ But the influence of the anthropological sense shows up in less technical ways. When you think you could do better with “cultural awareness” or say good things about the “culture of our congregation,” when you recognize you are in a “cross-cultural situation” or are worried about the state of “American culture,” you are relying on a concept of culture that can be traced back to Tylor.

These two ways of using the term “culture” suggest it can be useful (if awkward) to distinguish “culture in the descriptive sense” (or “culture for description”) and “culture in the evaluative sense” (or “culture for evaluation”). Culture in the descriptive sense means *the concept of culture helps you to describe and understand a group of people*. Cultural anthropology approaches culture for description. Culture is an object to be studied and interpreted. Calls for cultural humility and skills in cross-cultural communication also use culture in the descriptive sense. Culture in the evaluative sense means that you are making a value judgment either about culture itself or about something important for culture. In *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold argued that it was *either* culture or anarchy for England. Calls for a “counter-culture” imply that there is something fundamentally wrong with culture. “Cultural

You can think of culture in still other senses, but these two—the descriptive and the evaluative—cover a lot of what Christians in the United States care about when they think and speak about culture.

politics” and “culture wars” use culture in the evaluative sense, too, because they are concerned with what is good and right for the society’s way of life. Abortion is a cultural issue in the United States because some Americans think a woman’s right to choose is overall good while other Americans believe abortion is wrong and therefore think that right allows, even promotes, evil. It is the same with gun rights, same-sex marriage, critical race theory, climate change, socialism, social media, and many other topics.

It is the same way in groups smaller than a nation. For example, some Christians promote traditional orders of worship because they are countercultural, that is, resist or oppose some features of the wider culture, while some others promote the same orders because they are “transcultural,” that is, developed from uses in many cultures and therefore supposedly free of cultural bias.¹⁸ Culture is involved in evaluation; this is culture in the evaluative sense.

At this point, you might object that the distinction between description and evaluation must collapse. No one undertakes a description unless there is some *value* to it, and no one can make a credible evaluation without a useful *description*. The two sides of this objection, however, help to make the distinction—a heuristic distinction—clearer. When you think, “It would be good to understand this group or community better,” you may well seek to understand the culture of the group or community. Here culture matters in the descriptive sense. If, however, you think, “Something is wrong in this group or community,” you may well seek to change the culture of the group or community. Here culture matters in the evaluative sense.

You can think of culture in still other senses, but these two—the descriptive and the evaluative—cover a lot of what Christians in the United States care about when they think and speak about culture.

“Cover a lot” is actually a drastic understatement. So much has been and continues to be said, debated, endorsed, misrepresented, developed, and rejected along these two lines that there is no way to survey it systematically. But, of course, this means that it is quite possible to make some unsystematic remarks and suggestions. I have taken advantage of being unsystematic and refrained from addressing most currently pressing topics like race, gender, climate change, and technology. I have not done so out of fear, but rather because they are the kinds of things too many people fixate upon. They matter, but they should not be permitted to obscure other important concerns.

Culture always can matter, but culture does not always matter

When you say, “Culture always can matter,” you are implying that nothing can be made “acultural” or “culturally neutral.” Culture, in other words, can never be factored *out* of the equation. You would allow that some matters are “noncultural,” like height and weight. This means that they are the same no matter the culture of the person. But even here these concepts are human inventions and therefore, in this regard, matters of culture.

The point for saying this is made against those who think we can and should strive to be free of cultural bias, especially in matters like worship, preaching, catechesis, and spiritual care. It might be said that, in certain specific situations, cultural bias does not matter, but not in general. A general claim about something being “culturally neutral” confuses culture in the descriptive sense with culture in the evaluative sense. Culture taken in the descriptive sense is concerned with “that complex whole” of all human capacities, activities, and products. As such, this is one very broad way of dealing with ourselves as God’s creatures. The mistake of thinking you can be “acultural” is in thinking that you can overcome your creatureliness. That is a very big mistake.

Everything we say and do is culturally informed and therefore culturally biased. But since everything is culturally informed, it may mean that this formation doesn’t matter for this group or that situation.

The scope of culture—especially the cosmopolitan

Culture, whether in the descriptive or the evaluative sense, applies in different ways. In other words, the scope of culture and cultural interpretation, differences, problems, solutions, and so on, may vary. Eliot identified three ways “culture” applies: to an individual, to a group or community, and to a whole society. For Eliot, the whole society was the most comprehensive setting.¹⁹

We should add at least a fourth way. Following Matthew Arnold, we might call this a “cosmopolitan” way of identifying a culture (in the non-pejorative sense of belonging to many parts and regions of the world). In addition to the Industrial Revolution and democratic reforms, Arnold was concerned about Nonconformist Christians in England. One of his arguments against them was that their education was inferior. “The fruitful men of English Puritanism and Nonconformity are men who were trained within the pale of the Establishment,—Milton, Baxter, Wesley. A generation or two outside the Establishment, and Puritanism produces men of national mark no more.” But Arnold allowed that Catholicism and Judaism were also capable of this. How? Because they were “cosmopolitan” (194).

*Everything we say and do
is culturally informed and
therefore culturally biased.*

Benedict Anderson, in his pathbreaking book *Imagined Communities*, was referring to cosmopolitan communities when he observed: “Few things are more impressive than the vast territorial stretch of the Ummah Islam from Morocco to the Sulu Archipelago, of Christendom from Paraguay to Japan, and of the Buddhist world from Sri Lanka to the Korean peninsula. The great sacred cultures . . . incorporated conceptions of immense communities.”²⁰

The idea of a cosmopolitan community helps us deal with at least two matters. The first concerns the church and her life. Earlier I gave an example about some calling for traditional orders of worship because they would be “countercultural” and others calling for the same orders because they would be “transcultural.” This brings some confusion about the use of traditional orders, but, following the first point, it is also mistaken to think “transcultural” means “free of cultural bias.” “Transcultural,” however, does make sense if it is a synonym for *cosmopolitan*. Something cosmopolitan is finite, limited, biased. But the boundaries of a cosmopolitan community do not correspond neatly to other boundaries. It is the same way with the New Testament canon, the Nicene Creed, and the Church Year. Their use of the world over testifies to a cosmopolitan community and, accordingly, are key features of a cosmopolitan culture. At the same time, to be sure, the church needs to recognize cultural matters at the level of nations, communities, and individuals.

The second matter involves politics. When Muslim women all over the world wear headscarves and other coverings, they reflect the practice of a *cosmopolitan* religious community. Bans on their wearing headscarves reflect how this is also countercultural. In the United States, questions about religious practices and symbols are usually treated in terms of the First Amendment of the Constitution, which prohibits the Congress of the United States from establishing any religion and allows for the free exercise of religion. For civil reasons, Christians, Muslims, and other religious people should argue before the courts in these terms. But with American society in general, this approach gives up too much. If Christians in the United States want their children to be led in prayer before, during, and after a game involving the local public high school, their neighbors should know the specifically *Christian* reasons for wanting this, not only the Constitutional argument for permitting this. Why? Because the reason isn't to win in the courts. This limits the range of culture to a nation, but the church is not limited to the boundaries of any state. If there is a Christian reason for prayer at public high school sporting events (and there may not be), it is, ultimately, to confess Christ clearly and faithfully along with all other Christians.

Making sense of “popular culture”

An obvious gap in my analysis of culture concerns “popular culture.” It does not readily account for worldwide interest in Charlie Chaplin, Elvis Presley, the World

Cup, or BTS. It does not make clear sense of United Artists, NBC, Amazon, or TikTok. The reason is that none of these originate from or depend on a particular community or region. Nevertheless, the influence of popular culture is undeniable. So, it needs an explanation.

The idea of a cosmopolitan culture helps to do this. What we often call “popular culture” are the products of producers and outlets of mass media like books and electronic media (radio, TV, and digital). Penguin Random House, Disney, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, TikTok, Fox, Sony, and the BBC are some of the producers and outlets for the words, sounds, and images that make up popular culture. These producers do not arise from communities; they aim to *create* cosmopolitan groups of consumers. Technology enables them to do this, because technology allows the unlimited repeated distribution of content. One article, one image, one sound recording can be distributed thousands or millions or billions of times. Dickens published in this way, and so did Arnold. Today, advances in technology only make their successes easier to produce. Some aim for huge successes, but others aim for modest but steady returns.

“It’s Not How You Look, It’s How You Think You Look”

This line is from Jack Schultz, professor of anthropology at Concordia University, Irvine, in a presentation for the 2014 Multiethnic Symposium at Concordia Seminary.²¹ He had been asked to show how and why it is important to recognize and distinguish between “the variables of culture and the constants of theology.” He began this task by recalling, after moving from Oklahoma to California, visits to the beach with family and friends. They enjoyed the sun, sand, and sea. But, he confided, “we were regularly astounded by the beach attire and the confidence, if not brazenness, of the adults of all shapes and sizes who squeezed themselves into the smallest of swimsuits, so that more than once I remarked wryly, ‘remember, it’s not *how* you look, it’s how you *think* you look.’”²² He used this line to caution his hearers that, speaking as anthropologist, he could see it is often this way in the church. “The important feature here,” he explained, “is that what we *are* often contrasts to what we *think* we are. There is often a disconnect between how we view ourselves and how we actually are.”²³

Schultz’s insight is valuable because it points out an always relevant but often overlooked confusion. What we actually are is what matters, and we should not confuse this with what we believe, or hope is the case. Naturally, hardly anyone would disagree. The real question is how to do this. Schultz offered two directives.

What we actually are is what matters, and we should not confuse this with what we believe, or hope is the case.

The first is to take seriously both our theology and our cultures. The theology and what faithful theology calls for—the proclamation of the word of God—are *constants*. They should not yield to anyone or anything. But the contexts in which they take place, the forms in which they are given and received, the life and the people among whom all of this happens, are all *variables*. They vary from place to place, time to time. How we should properly distinguish them is, therefore, not a matter of prescribed method but of dialogue, experiment, negotiation, and adjustments. “These adjustments must go both ways, each responding to the admonitions and warnings of the other. It is here that we will prove the ‘proper division’ between the constants of theology and the variables of culture.”²⁴

“The second directive is to speak the word of God to persons, not to cultures.”²⁵ Culture helps us to understand people, but the word is meant to be addressed to individual persons, not kinds of people. “And as we get to know these individuals with their diverse backgrounds and proclaim the word clearly to them, we’ll begin getting what we need for the ‘proper division.’”²⁶

How “ethnographic theology” makes sense

Earlier I illustrated an approach to culture in the descriptive sense by saying “It would be good to understand this group or community better.” One can approach this task in many ways, like weighing them or getting their ages, but one important cultural approach is as *ethnography*. This is what Clifford Geertz proposed in his influential book *The Interpretation of Cultures*. He in turn explained ethnography not only and not primarily in terms of techniques and procedures but as “an elaborate venture in . . . ‘thick description.’”²⁷ Geertz contended that culture consists of “webs of significance [man] himself has spun,” and that cultural analysis was a matter of interpreting their meaning. “It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical.”²⁸ Put too simply, this involves first observing social activities, assuming that they embody or otherwise reflect various meanings, and then trying to ascertain those meanings. “Doing ethnography,” he said, “is like trying to read (in the sense of ‘construct a reading of’) a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior.”²⁹

This description of ethnography is highly abstract and incomplete, but instead of trying to do more myself, I would direct you to Ken Chitwood’s article in the Fall 2021 issue of *Concordia Journal*. Chitwood is an ethnographer as well as pastor, so he knows very well what he is talking about. He suggested “that to effectively discern how to navigate the ‘diversity and difference’ of the world and the contexts in which we live and work in, we [pastors and theologians] need to become better ethnographers.”³⁰ To do this he proposed “ethnographic theology,” or “ethnography as *theological practice* [which] helps pastors and theologians most holistically understand

the diverse, overlapping, and sometimes contradicting religious experiences and perspectives in our congregations, communities, and church bodies.”³¹

Ethnographic theology, then, is a methodological rather than a doctrinal or topical proposal. It calls for a certain way of doing theology, along with particular dispositions and habits. Chitwood acknowledged that this work ultimately calls for specialized training. “In the end, there is no substitute for proper training in ethnography.”³² Still, the promise of ethnographic theology is intriguing and extensive. Chitwood illustrated this promise by showing how ethnography can both make strange the familiar academic theology many pastors studied hard to acquire, and make more familiar the seeming odd views, questions, and proposals (he called it “everyday theology”) so often expressed by parishioners and others. And he suggested practical projects by which pastors might try out the tools of ethnographic theology for themselves, like going to work with a parishioner and taking on the “participant observer” role at the next Winkel, trying to provide a “thick description” of the meeting.

It is not always “Culture or Anarchy”

As noted earlier, Arnold’s book *Culture and Anarchy* has been influential. Its own success, and the success of writings like it, tend to obscure its chief flaw: seeing things in black and white, proposing an “either/or.” Sometimes, the situation really boils down to “Yes” or “No.” But not always.

Among the books that Gerald Graff identified as rewritings of *Culture and Anarchy* are *The Culture of Narcissism* by Christopher Lasch and *The Closing of the American Mind* by Allan Bloom.³³ Philosopher Charles Taylor identified both books, too, in his 1991 book *The Ethics of Authenticity*.³⁴ Taylor acknowledged that he agreed with much of what such writers made of contemporary culture, including their criticism of relativism and the widespread climate of self-centeredness. Nevertheless, he wanted to resist something common in their arguments, namely, that they did not recognize the “powerful moral ideal at work here, however debased and travestied its expression might be.”³⁵ Taylor pointed out that terms like “narcissism” implied “that there is no moral ideal at work here,” and that “what gets lost in this critique is the moral force of the ideal of authenticity.”³⁶ Taylor drew the term “authenticity” from literary critic Lionel Trilling. As an ideal, authenticity meant seeking “a standard of what we ought to desire.”³⁷ “Ought to” is important here, because it implies a wider moral standard than merely personal needs or wants. The ideal of authenticity implied self-fulfillment, but the standard of self-fulfillment was not purely subjective. So, talk about authenticity was to draw attention to the sense that “many people feel *called* to do this, feel they ought to do this, feel their lives would be somehow wasted or unfulfilled if they didn’t do it.”³⁸

*It is not always
culture or anarchy.
It probably rarely is.*

Matthew Arnold had warned against a society where “Doing what one likes” is the norm. He thought this would lead to anarchy. But Taylor understood sayings like this to express the desire to do something that one found fulfilling and rewarding, rather than one that filled one with dread or resentment.

My point in introducing Taylor is not primarily about finding an alternative interpretation of industrial and post-industrial society (although there is benefit in this). Rather it is that Taylor does not assume the worst. He does not deny bad things and bad outcomes, but this does not preclude some underlying good intention or motive.

In our time, where there are “culture wars” and “cultural politics,” it is common to assume the worst. Preparing for the worst is prudent, but assuming the worst is mean. It is not always culture or anarchy. It probably rarely is. And even if it were to be, it has no lasting impact. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Endnotes

- 1 Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru, with an introduction by T. S. Eliot (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952), 25.
- 2 T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), 11.
- 3 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 1–2.
- 4 Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Gerald Malsbary, with an introduction by Roger Scruton (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998). Curtis White, *The Spirit of Disobedience: Resisting the Charms of Fake Politics, Mindless Consumption, and the Culture of Total Work* (Sausalito: PolPointPress, 2007).
- 5 George Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes towards the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971). Mario Vargas Llosa, *Notes on the Death of Culture: Essays on Spectacle and Society*, trans. John King (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015). The title of the original edition is *Civilización del espectáculo*, or “Civilization of the Spectacle,” the title of the first essay.
- 6 Vargas Llosa, *Notes on the Death of Culture*, 1.
- 7 Vargas Llosa, *Notes on the Death of Culture*, 2.
- 8 Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Man’s Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1871), 1.
- 9 Not always, to be sure. In the space of two paragraphs, Terry Eagleton offered two other ways to distinguish between culture and civilization:

‘Culture’ and ‘civilisation’ originally meant much the same thing; but in the modern age, as we shall see, they have not only been distinguished but actually viewed as opposites. In the annals of modern history, the Germans have generally been seen as representing culture, while the French win first

prize as flag-bearers of civilisation. The Germans have Goethe, Kant and Mendelssohn, while the French have perfume, haute cuisine and Chateaufort-du-Pape. The Germans are spiritual while the French are sophisticated. It is a choice between Wagner and Dior. Stereotypically speaking, the former are too high-minded and the latter too hard-boiled.

Roughly speaking, mailboxes are part of civilization, but what colour you paint them (green in the Republic of Ireland, for example) is a matter of culture. You need traffic lights in modern societies, but red does not have to signal 'Stop' and green 'Go.' During the Cultural Revolution in Beijing there was a demand for it to be the other way round. A good deal of culture involves less what you do than how you do it. It can denote a set of styles, techniques and established procedures. There are different ways of running a car plant, for example, which is why one can contrast Renault culture with Volkswagen culture (Terry Eagleton, *Culture* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016], 4–5; emphases added to indicate the two different takes on the distinction between culture and civilization).

- 10 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 12. This book is virtually unclassifiable, being at once a lexicon, an archaeology of meanings, a history of ideas, and a collection of comments and short essays of social and political criticism (see also p. 13). But it is also virtually indispensable for thinking about culture and society in our time, as much when one objects or is dismayed as when one is enlightened or impressed.
- 11 Williams addressed the question of why England matters so much in this development in the Morningside edition of his book *Culture and Society: 1780–1950*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

Another regular question is why I centered the book on English writers, when there were so many obviously relevant writers in other languages and cultures. It is a fair question. . . . Yet I am still sure that the book could only be formed, in its particular method, around this particular experience and tradition. The industrial revolution, which eventually swept or impinged on most of the world, began in England. The fundamentally new social and cultural relationships and issues which were part of that historically decisive period were therefore first felt, in their intense and unprecedented immediacy, within this culture. At the beginning, and indeed for two or three generations, it was literally a problem of finding a language to express them. Thus though it is true that comparable changes happened in other societies, and new forms of thought and art were created to respond to them, often in equally or more penetrating and interesting ways than in these English writers, it is nevertheless of some permanent general importance to see what happened where it happened first (x–xi).

- 12 All references to *Culture and Anarchy* are from Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and other writings*, ed., Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). The exact location will be identified in parentheses. The book collects a series of articles that Arnold had published in 1867, to which he added a lengthy preface.
- 13 "Mr. Murphy" was William Murphy, whose anti-Catholic lectures prompted violence and rioting in the late 1860s, which were manifestations of the anarchy that Arnold feared.
- 14 Gerald Graff, "Arnold, Reason, and Common Culture," in Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. Samuel Lipman, with commentary by Maurice Cowling, Gerald Graff, Samuel Lipman, and Steven Marcus (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 186.
- 15 Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 1.
- 16 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3, 4. See also Williams, *Keywords*, 91–92.
- 17 Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32. Niebuhr relied on modern anthropologists, especially Bronislaw Malinowski and Ruth Benedict, in this section devoted to a definition of "culture."

- 18 These two claims are not necessarily incompatible, as I will discuss later.
- 19 Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, 19.
- 20 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 12. As for evidence of the book being “pathbreaking,” see the Introduction to Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). “I have obviously drawn heavily on the pioneering work of Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities*” (2).
- 21 Jack M. Schultz, “Properly Dividing: Distinguishing the Variables of Culture from the Constants of Theology or It’s Not How You Look, It’s How You Think You Look,” *Missio Apostolica* 22 (2014): 63–72. It is available online at the Lutheran Society for Missiology website. https://lsfm.global/uploads/files/MA-5-14-Online_Final-Final.pdf
- 22 Schultz, “Properly Dividing,” 64.
- 23 Schultz, “Properly Dividing,” 65.
- 24 Schultz, “Properly Dividing,” 70.
- 25 Schultz, “Properly Dividing,” 70.
- 26 Schultz, “Properly Dividing,” 71.
- 27 Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 6. The term and idea of “thick description” comes from Gilbert Ryle.
- 28 Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 5.
- 29 Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 10.
- 30 Ken Chitwood, “Making Ethnography More Familiar, Theology More Strange: Ethnographic Theology as Theological Practice,” *Concordia Journal* 47 (2021): 36.
- 31 Chitwood, “Making Ethnography More Familiar,” 36.
- 32 Chitwood, “Making Ethnography More Familiar,” 46.
- 33 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979). Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, foreword by Saul Bellow (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).
- 34 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- 35 Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 15.
- 36 Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 16, 17.
- 37 Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 16.
- 38 Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 17.

Christ in Film

David Lewis



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of Mark), narrative criticism, and film analysis. His writings include "Cinema and the American Mind" in *The American Mind Meets the Mind of Christ* (Concordia Seminary Press, 2010).

In the introduction to *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years*, W. Barnes Tatum refers to Jaroslav Pelikan's 1985 book *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*. Pelikan presents eighteen images that reflect the various ways western culture has understood Jesus's ministry and teaching, and Pelikan does this through commenting upon various

portrayals of Jesus in literature and the visual arts. These are examples derived from what Tatum refers to as "high culture." Pelikan, however, makes no reference to the many portrayals of Jesus in film, a medium Tatum refers to as an example of "popular culture."¹ Tatum then argues that, since film is the uniquely characteristic medium of the twentieth (and now twenty-first) century and due to the effect that American cinema in particular has had upon both American and global culture over the past century, film should neither be dismissed nor overlooked as one place to which anyone may turn to understand how Jesus is understood in our American and increasingly global cultural context. As Tatum argues, one finds in the medium of film "cultural evidence" of how Jesus of Nazareth, the man he calls "the dominant figure of western culture for most of two thousand years," is understood as "a central figure in an emerging global culture."²

I would argue further that through film a viewer may also be presented with various *theological* approaches and appraisals of Jesus and the biblical narrative of his ministry, death, and resurrection. Some of these appraisals may reaffirm the faith and

confession of the apostolic church. Yet some of these appraisals may also challenge this faith and confession. (What is more, sometimes both kinds of appraisals may be detected in the same film.) In film a viewer may also be confronted with examples of how the Jesus-narrative is appropriated by those who may even be outside of the Christian tradition and, therefore, then reapplied to fit their own worldview. In each case, these attempts will reflect the point of view of the makers of these films, their “Christology” so to speak. Sometimes also these presentations may reflect what is believed about Jesus in the popular culture or shape the ideas, thoughts, and beliefs about Jesus in that same culture.³

That such Jesus-films should at least to some degree “be on the radar” of any pastor, theologian, and Christian believer, one need only consider the cultural impact that came with the release of two theatrical films about Jesus’s ministry—Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1987): At the release of these two films there were organized protests by certain elements within American society that were offended by the material and subject matter of each film. There was also coverage in the media about each film accompanied by debates both in the church and civil realm. Ironically, all of this served to promote interest in both films: Scorsese’s film was a modest success in the box office while Gibson’s film became both the highest grossing religious-themed film and the highest grossing rated-R film at the time after its release.

One should also consider the cultural impact and/or popularity of films that do not have “Jesus of Nazareth” as a character, but where there is another character who is depicted as a Christ-figure. Such “Christ-figure films” would include classic films such as *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) and *Dirty Harry* (1971) as well as neo-classic films such as *The Matrix* (1999) and *Spider-Man 2* (2004). These films also reveal the various attitudes and understandings of Jesus that are found in American popular culture. When such a film is recognized as a “Christ-figure film,” it may then also have the potential of shaping views about Jesus in American popular culture.⁴

In this article I will use a distinction suggested by Tatum between two types of films that I put together into the genre of “Christ in film”: The first subgenre would be that of the “Jesus-film.” A Jesus-film is any film in which Jesus of Nazareth appears as an important and central character.⁵ Note that the character of Jesus does not have to be the main character of such a film, as in *Ben Hur* (1959), but he must be a character such that the narrative of the film would not make sense without this character. Thus, Monty Python’s *The Life of Brian* (1979) would qualify as a “Jesus-film” even if the character “Jesus” appears in only two scenes. The second subgenre would be that of the “Christ-figure film.”⁶ A Christ-figure film is a film in which there is a central character that while not Jesus of Nazareth, functions as a Christ-figure in the film’s narrative. These films also are appropriations of the Gospel-narrative, though arguably in a more indirect and sometimes less obvious way.

I. Jesus-films

A Jesus-film is any film in which “Jesus of Nazareth” appears as a character central to the narrative of the film. The narrative of the film depends upon the presence and actions of the character “Jesus” in the story. In several Jesus-films the character “Jesus” is not the main character of the film. Examples of such films include “sword and sandal” epics of the 1950s and early 1960s—*Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* (1953), and *Barabbas* (1962). Monty Python’s film *The Life of Brian* is also included in this group. The most notable (and critically praised) example in this group is *Ben Hur*. Although in each of these films Jesus of Nazareth remains a secondary (or even tertiary) character, these classify as Jesus-films because the narrative of each film is centered to varying degrees upon the importance of the one character “Jesus of Nazareth,” and each film is also reflecting upon the significance of Jesus’s life and ministry in focusing upon how this ministry affected (or did not affect) the lives of characters who were his contemporaries.

The most recognizable films in the subgenre of “Jesus-film,” however, are those in which the character of Jesus appears as the protagonist of the film and where the purpose of the film is to tell in whole or in part the story of Jesus’s life and ministry. Films in this group include *King of Kings* (1961), *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (1964), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *Jesus Christ, Superstar* (1973), *Godspell* (1973), *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), *Jesus* (aka *The Jesus Film Project*) (1979), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), *The Gospel of John* (2003), and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Tatum also classifies the film *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) in this sub-genre, although this film is technically about an actor playing Jesus in a passion play.⁷

There are several ways in which to classify and approach Jesus-films. One way is to consider the relationship of the narrative in the film to the narrative of the Gospels. A second way is to consider the portrayal of Jesus in the film, that is, the film’s Christology.

A. Relationship of the Narrative in the Film to the Gospels

How do the makers of Jesus-films approach the presentation of the story of Jesus on film in relationship to the Gospel narratives? In the first edition of his book, Tatum identifies three such approaches—the One Gospel approach, the Harmonization approach, and the Fictional or Free approach.⁸ This remains a useful means to approach this question.

1. The One Gospel Approach

Using the one Gospel approach, the filmmaker takes one of the four Gospel narratives and bases the screenplay and film solely upon this narrative. Events from Christ’s life and ministry and all sayings and dialogue are taken from only the Gospel that is being followed. Examples of the one Gospel approach include Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *The*

Gospel According to Matthew (1964); *Jesus* (aka *The Jesus-film Project*) (1979) which follows Luke; *The Visual Bible: Matthew* (1993); and *The Gospel of John* (2003).

The one Gospel approach may initially appear to be the more objective approach toward making a Jesus-film: In other approaches the filmmakers may conceive new scenes and dialogue either by harmonizing the various Gospel accounts or imagining non-biblical settings, actions, and speech. Yet in the one Gospel approach, theoretically every scene and all sayings and dialogue are taken from the words of the specific Gospel being followed. There should be no harmonization with any of the other three accounts. There should be no insertion of non-biblical material. This would limit the artistic license of the filmmakers from reimagining existing scenes by harmonizing the various Gospel accounts or from creating non-biblical events and speech. Yet the filmmakers could nevertheless argue that they are being more faithful to the text by not taking such license.

It must be noted, however, that even with such an approach, the film's director is still involved in interpreting the Gospel that is being followed. What is more, other people involved in the production—screenwriters, actors, editors, and others—will also affect this interpretation of the one Gospel. There are aspects in any film, things such as facial expressions, tone of voice, costumes, lighting, and settings, that in and of themselves make meaning and thus offer interpretation and commentary of the biblical texts that are being depicted visually. Therefore, it could never be claimed that the one Gospel approach is a *purely* objective approach even if the filmmakers attempt to commit to following only one Gospel.

Consider the following two examples of such interpretation where the context in the written Gospels is more ambiguous: Regarding Matthew 14:13, there is debate about what Jesus heard that prompted him to withdraw into the wilderness. Did he hear about the death of John the Baptist and so then withdraw to mourn his death? Or did he hear about Herod's interest in him (14:1) and withdraw to avoid conflict with the authorities before it was his time to die? Commentators argue for either of these possibilities. In Pasolini's *Matthew*, however, what Jesus hears is the report of John's death. The character Jesus at this point (uncharacteristically for the portrayal of Jesus in this film) responds by showing some emotion and even shedding a tear. When they withdraw, it appears it is in order to mourn the death of John. Thus, the filmmakers have interpreted this scene from Matthew for the audience.

In its depiction of the healing of the paralytic and its aftermath in John 5, the film *John* follows the sequence of events and the words of Jesus's speech in order. The filmmakers, however, also engage in an interesting bit of interpretation. In the written account, the character of the paralytic is depicted somewhat ambiguously. After being healed, he later reveals Jesus to the authorities and thus prompts the conflict that becomes the subject of most of this chapter. The written account never tells us whether this healed man ever comes to faith in Jesus. This contrasts with the miracle

in John 9 where the healed man does come to faith (see Jn 9:35–38). In the film version, however, the healed paralytic is depicted as being present for Jesus's entire speech to his opponents (Jn 5:17–47). The actor portraying this one man smiles with joy at the words of Jesus. This apparently indicates that this character believes these words and now has faith in Jesus. In this way the filmmakers leave no ambiguity regarding the faith and fate of this character where the question remains open in the written account.

Another important issue to consider is that of the four films listed above, only *The Visual Bible: Matthew* and *John* present the entire Gospel narratives that they claim to follow on film both in their entirety and in the same order as it is found in the written Gospels.⁹ *Jesus* presents an edited and abridged version of the Gospel of Luke that does not always follow the sequence in Luke. Therefore, interpretation has taken place as the filmmakers have decided which events from Luke to include or exclude. Pasolini's *Matthew* also presents an abridged version of the Gospel of Matthew. More importantly, however, Pasolini also places some events in Matthew's narrative out of sequence. For instance, in this film Jesus's instructions to the apostles based on Matthew 10 are given *before* the Sermon on the Mount based on Matthew 5–7. Then, when the Sermon on the Mount is depicted, it is not the entire sermon, but sayings from the sermon that are not ordered as they are found in the written Gospel. Thus, both *Jesus* and *Matthew* do not so much depict on film the Gospels that they claim to follow but abridged and even rearranged versions of those written Gospels. The filmmakers thus have produced a narrative that, though based on only one of the four Gospel accounts, is actually a unique retelling of the story of Jesus's life and ministry.

It may be noted further that two of these one Gospel films (Pasolini's *Matthew* and *Jesus*) also include (either intentionally or unintentionally) some degree of harmonization (see the harmonization approach section below): For instance, in *Matthew* the scene of the anointing at Bethany depicts Judas Iscariot as the only disciple to protest the actions of the woman. This contradicts Matthew 26:8–9 where *all* of the disciples protest. Yet this also makes an indirect reference to John 12:4–6 where Judas is singled out as the protestor. In this way this scene in *Matthew* harmonizes Matthew 26 and John 12. In the narrative of this particular film, then, this interpretive move works to make the viewer see a direct connection between Judas's protest, Jesus's defense of the woman, and then Judas's decision to betray Jesus, something perhaps only indirectly evident in Matthew 26. Then later in this same film, Mary the mother of Jesus is shown at the cross with John the apostle. Again, there is no mention of Mary or John's presence in Matthew 27, but this is found in John 19:25–27. Again, the film harmonizes the Gospels of Matthew and John. What is more, there is finally a lengthy sequence where Mary is depicted as mourning over Jesus's dead body; this sequence is not based in any Gospel account, but in the

tradition of Christian art depicting this very scene. In this way Pasolini also adds a scene that is purely fictional and not found in any Gospel account (see the fictional/free approach section below).

Jesus also contains some harmonization: The film follows the Lukan narrative throughout, but then there is an “altar call” sequence at the film’s conclusion where the viewers are invited “to make a decision for Jesus.” In this sequence there are references made to the other Gospels, in particular John, to make the point that Jesus is the unique man to whom the viewer should respond by “making a decision.” These references, at least in this viewer’s estimation, take away from the claim that the makers are simply following one Gospel’s narrative to the exclusion of others.

2. The Harmonization Approach

Another approach is to combine the narrative and dialog from one or more of the four Gospel accounts and harmonize them together into one narrative on film. This is the approach of *King of Kings* (1961), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). With such an approach the filmmakers can perhaps present the fuller story found in all four Gospel accounts and include all of the favorite and/or well-known actions and speeches of Jesus that someone familiar with the story (though maybe not familiar with the actual written Gospel accounts) might expect to see in a story of Jesus. In this way, in a single narrative, both the shepherds (Luke 2) and the magi (Matthew 2) can visit the infant Jesus. Later Jesus can speak the beatitudes of Matthew 5, tell the parable of the prodigal son of Luke 15, and quote John 3:16. At the cross Jesus can speak all seven words from the cross. Then, in the post-resurrection sequence, Jesus can appear one-on-one to Mary Magdalene as depicted in John 20 while next commissioning the disciples on the mountain as depicted in Matthew 28.

As with the one Gospel approach, filmmakers following the harmonization approach might claim that they are deriving every scene and all sayings from Scripture, though now they are following more than one Gospel. It should be noted that this approach will also involve a great deal of interpretation on the part of the makers of the film. This is evident first in how and why they choose which events and sayings from the four different Gospel accounts to use and then how these are “redacted” and arranged in sequence for the narrative on film. The end result of such efforts is the “composition” of what really becomes a new Gospel-narrative, a unique presentation of Jesus conceived by the filmmakers. The product then should be viewed and interpreted as something distinct even from the biblical Gospel narratives on which it is supposedly based. Thus, what emerges in Franco Zeffirelli’s *Jesus of Nazareth* is really “the Gospel according to Franco Zeffirelli” and in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* “the Passion according to Gibson.”

There are several additional issues that must be addressed with this approach:

one issue is that when the harmonization approach has been used, the presentation of Jesus in certain Gospel accounts—usually those of John and Luke—tends to prevail. The more dramatically human presentation of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark is often overshadowed by that of the other Gospels.

Another issue is that this harmonizing does not always flow in a seamless way, and can lead to some awkward scenes (at least for any viewer who knows the four written accounts): For instance, in *King of Kings*, the scene depicting the Sermon on the Mount actually consists of the character Jesus quoting various sayings taken from Matthew, Luke, and John—and not just Matthew 5–7 or Luke 6. There is also at least one saying that is not found in any of the Gospels but was apparently scripted by the screenwriters. What the viewer finds in this scene is not so much a coherent discourse, but the character Jesus dialoging with the crowd and responding to their questions and criticisms with what amounts to Jesus’s “top 40” sayings from the Gospels.

In *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, Jesus’s teaching in the Temple precinct includes random sayings from Matthew, John, and Paul from *1 Corinthians 13* that are edited together into what comes off (at least in this viewer’s estimation) as awkward at best, unintentional comedy at worst. In this same film Jesus’s farewell to his disciples at his ascension includes random quotes from the Sermon on the Mount and other parts of Gospels, and for some viewers this too may appear awkward and even somewhat comedic.

It should also be noted that in those films that follow the harmonization approach, there is still much that is “fictional” (see the fictional/free approach section below), that is, events and dialogue that are not found in any of the four Gospel accounts. For instance, consider that the content of Jesus’s teaching at the synagogue in Capernaum (Mark 1:21–28 and Luke 4:31–37) is not specified in the Gospel narratives, only that it was perceived as “having authority.”¹⁰ In *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and *Jesus of Nazareth*, however, this teaching is given content by the screenwriters, and in both films most of what Jesus says during this sequence is not found in any Gospel account. Such a move obviously involves direct acts of interpretation on the part of the filmmakers and become clear windows through which to view the theological bias of the filmmakers.¹¹ Nevertheless, many uninformed and unsuspecting viewers may not be aware of what is happening and, therefore, believe that what the character Jesus says is taken from Scripture.

What is more, with this approach certain events of the Gospel narratives can be taken out of their context in the Gospel narratives and made to fit another, even fictitious context. For instance, in *Jesus of Nazareth* the parable of the prodigal son is used to fit a context that appears nothing like the context of Luke 15. Jesus tells the parable while at dinner in Matthew’s house, and the intended audience is not the Pharisees, but both Matthew and his brother James (the first half of the parable) and then Simon Peter (the second half of the parable). This film depicts Matthew and

Peter as personal enemies until they are reconciled by Jesus through this parable. The scene that results is thus not really even a true harmony of the several different Gospel accounts but a creation of the filmmakers, and *thus a fiction* (and this is true even if the parable itself is found in Luke 15).

All four of the films listed above that follow the harmonization approach are instead unique retellings of the story of Jesus where each filmmaker rearranges the narratives of the four Gospels and then also includes nonbiblical and even fictitious elements. Viewers should be aware of this and not conclude that what they are viewing is necessarily always reflective of the biblical narratives.

3. Fictional/Free Approach

A third approach is to adapt the story of Jesus more independently from the Gospel narratives. With such an approach there is potential for much more interpretation of Jesus's identity and mission by the filmmakers—and *this indeed appears to be the point of this approach*. Such films will indicate the reflection of the filmmakers upon the significance of Jesus and his ministry. Examples of such an approach include films such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *Godspell* (1973), and *Jesus of Montreal* (1989), all three of which depict the story of Jesus as “a play within a film.” Another example of this approach is *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), an adaptation of a novel of the same title. In Monty Python's *The Life of Brian* (1979), the character of Jesus remains in the background while the film follows instead the misadventures of a man who is mistaken for being the Christ. Interestingly, the examples cited in this approach have also tended to be examples of Jesus-films that offer a lower Christology (see below).

More recent examples of this approach include two films released in 2006, *The Color of the Cross* and *Son of Man*. The former is set in biblical times while the latter is set in contemporary South Africa. In both of these films Jesus and the disciples are portrayed as Africans whose teachings are ultimately opposed by the forces of colonialism and political corruption.

The biblical epics of the 1950s era—*Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* (1953), *Ben Hur* (1959), and *Barabbas* (1962)—are also Jesus-films that follow this fictional/free approach. The difference is that each of these films attempts to ground its fictional narrative in the historical reality of Jesus's death and resurrection and what this means for the characters in the story. Interestingly, the films listed here offer a higher Christology (see below). Therefore, there is no obvious connection between the fictional/free approach and a lower or higher Christology; the Christology of such films is dependent more on the views of the filmmakers.

There is a great deal of interdependence between these three approaches. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, for instance, though a harmonization of the four Gospel accounts, also includes extra-biblical and fictional material, while most of the events in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (the triumphal entry, the cleansing of the temple, the

Last Supper, the prayer in Gethsemane, the trial, and the crucifixion) can be found in the Gospel accounts. Nevertheless, the three approaches method outlined by Tatum is a useful way to categorize a Jesus-film in how the filmmakers attempt to use or not use the four written Gospel accounts. At the same time, the viewers of these films should understand that any of these attempts present a purely objective adaptation of the written Gospel accounts, as the filmmakers (even with the one Gospel and harmonizing approaches) are always engaged in interpretation.

B. Christology

Another useful and very important means by which to classify and distinguish among the Jesus-films is to analyze the Christology of the film as it depicts the person and work of Jesus: Does the film offer a higher or a lower Christology?

Higher Christology	Lower Christology
Jesus is clearly depicted as the Christ, the Son of God.	Jesus’s identity is not clearly portrayed, or his divinity is minimized.
Jesus is generally portrayed as a strong character.	Jesus is generally portrayed as a weak or conflicted character.
The death of Jesus is clearly associated with salvation.	Jesus’s death is not clearly associated with salvation.
Jesus is clearly portrayed as risen from the dead.	The resurrection is not portrayed or may even be denied.

To these lists I offer my own idiosyncratic “Lutheran” bias of distinguishing among these films: If Jesus’s role as Lord and Savior is overshadowed by his role simply as teacher of a new way of life or example by which people should live, then I argue that there is a lower Christology than if his role as Lord and Savior predominates. One additional factor to consider is the director’s own personal beliefs and agenda. For instance, the fact that Pasolini was an atheist can lead someone to classify his *Matthew* as a lower Christology film, even if this film does clearly portray Jesus as resurrected from the dead. The fact that the director did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus could arguably detract from this film’s Christology.

On the basis of these considerations, I make the following *three* distinctions among the Jesus-films:

Higher Christology	Middle Christology	Lower Christology
<i>Ben Hur</i>	<i>King of Kings</i>	<i>Jesus Christ Superstar</i>
<i>Jesus of Nazareth</i>	<i>The Greatest Story Ever Told</i>	<i>Godspell</i>
<i>The Jesus-film Project</i>	<i>The Gospel of Matthew</i>	<i>The Life of Brian</i>
<i>The Passion of the Christ</i>		<i>The Last Temptation of Christ</i>
<i>The Gospel of John</i>		<i>Jesus of Montreal</i>

The films which I classify as “higher” and “lower” Christology each corresponds nearly one-to-one with the guidelines I list above. (Note that *Ben Hur* does not depict the resurrection only because the film’s story ends on Good Friday; rather, it depicts the crucifixion itself as a healing, life-giving, life-changing event.)

In the category of “middle Christology” I place two of the great harmonization films *King of Kings* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, each of which were likely attempting to present a “higher Christology.” Both films, for instance, depict the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples. My reason for placing these films under “middle Christology,” however, is that overall, both films emphasize Jesus’s role as teacher (teacher of the way of peace and universal brotherhood in *King of Kings* and teacher of the power of faith and of mercy over judgment and sacrifice in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*). What is more, in *King of Kings* it is actually unclear why Jesus goes to the cross other than that he is rejected by the authorities. In *The Greatest Story Ever Told* Jesus’s death is briefly associated with salvation in a scene in which the devil (yes, the devil) quotes John 3:16 after Jesus is tried before Herod Antipas; other than this, there is not a clear connection between the cross and salvation in this film. It could well be that there is an assumption that the audience knows that Jesus’s death is associated with salvation, yet neither film makes it as clear as do the films listed under “higher Christology.”

This then leads to an obvious means by which to approach Jesus-films: Filmmakers that produce a Jesus-film with a “lower Christology” are offering their particular understanding of Jesus and his mission, and this perspective will not fully reflect what is taught by the apostolic church. When considering such films—if one chooses to watch them—the viewer should be aware of this. While no Jesus-film will fully reflect what is found in the written Gospel accounts apart from acts of interpretation on the part of the filmmakers, filmmakers who attempt to offer a “higher Christology”—whether or not they succeed—are *not* knowingly challenging the understanding of Jesus held by the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church and

taught in the four canonical Gospels. This cannot be said of filmmakers who present a “lower Christology” in their films.¹²

II. Christ-Figure Films

The second subgenre of “Christ in Film” is that of the “Christ-figure film.” A Christ-figure film is any film that has a character that functions in the film’s narrative as a Christ-figure. This character is not “Jesus of Nazareth.” This character fulfills a role similar to that of Jesus in the Gospels, or at least as the Gospel narratives are understood by the filmmakers and perhaps also certain elements within popular culture. The Christ-figure may have miracles ascribed to him or her. The Christ-figure may lead and inspire a group of disciples. Most importantly (though not always), the Christ-figure will serve some “saving role” in relationship to the other characters in the film.

Such a film may result from the deliberate efforts of the makers (screenwriters, directors, actors, others) to portray one character as a Christ-figure. But such a film could result from less deliberate intentions. *What would explain this?* To reference again the works of Pelikan and Tatum, the case could be made that the Gospel stories have had a profound impact upon our culture and thus have influenced the thoughts and worldviews of many people in America, even those who may not believe. A filmmaker does not even have to be fully aware that the Gospel stories have had this effect on the narrative of one’s own film. The Gospel-story is “out there” in American culture, and so it can be intentionally or unintentionally reflected in films produced within this culture.

One danger (which has been pointed out to me by several colleagues) is that of “over reading” and thus a tendency to find a Christ-figure in every film. Therefore, the viewer must consider to varying degrees how intentional is the portrayal of a “Christ-figure” in a film. One may consider the intentions of the author, that is, of those who made the film, but one must also consider the evidence within the film itself. Again, there could be such evidence apart from expressed authorial intent. Therefore, if a director or others argue that a film is not a Christ-figure film, and yet there is enough evidence to suggest that one character is a Christ-figure, then the evidence from the narrative should receive greater weight than the stated intentions of the filmmaker.

A. Main Evidence

When can a film be classified as a Christ-figure film?

1. *At some time in the film the character appears in cruciform or is associated with cross imagery.* Examples:

In *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), the character Luke appears in cruciform after “miraculously” consuming fifty eggs in an hour.

In *The Omega Man* (1971), the character Robert Neville is speared in the side and then dies in cruciform in a fountain of water (symbolizing baptism as well).

In *The Cowboys* (1972), rancher Wil Anderson lays on the ground in cruciform after being shot five times by the satanic villain.

In *Spider-Man 2* (2004), the character Peter Parker appears in cruciform while saving the occupants of a runaway train on an elevated track.

In *Gran Torino* (2008), the character Walt lays in cruciform after being shot to death.

In *Dirty Harry* (1971), the character Harry Callahan is beaten and nearly killed by Scorpio, the villain, at the foot of a cross.

2. *The character performs miracles which benefit others and/or identifies his/her function as a “Christ-figure” in relationship to the other characters in the narrative.* These miracles may be naturalistic in nature, but they are still recognized as miracles within the narrative of the film and inspire awe, hope, or confidence from the other characters in the film and the viewers. These miracles then demonstrate this one character’s authority or unique status. Examples:

In *Cool Hand Luke*, the character Luke consumes fifty eggs in an hour. This is only one of many other “miraculous feats” Luke performs that impress and inspire the other characters.

In *Dirty Harry*, the character Harry Callahan single-handedly stops a gang of bank robbers and then later single-handedly prevents a suicide.

In *The Cowboys*, the character Wil Anderson cures a boy of stuttering.

In *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), the character Andy Dufresne repeatedly gets the best of the prison officials and so earns the confidence of his fellow prisoners.

In *Spider-man 2*, the character Peter Parker saves a girl from a burning building while deprived of his superpowers.

In *The DaVinci Code* (2006), the character Sophie Neveu—who is depicted as a

descendent of Jesus—heals Robert Langdon of his claustrophobia and, it is strongly hinted, heals a junkie from his addiction.

3. *The character undergoes what can be interpreted as a passion, death, and/or resurrection.* The character may not literally die, yet he has an experience that is similar to death from which he then arises alive after this death-like experience. Examples:

In *Cool Hand Luke*, the character of Luke undergoes several such experiences throughout the film, but most notably during the sequence where the prison officials attempt to break him after his second escape.

In *Dirty Harry*, the character Harry Callahan is beaten into unconsciousness at the foot of a cross, but then awakens more determined than ever to stop the killer.

In *The Cowboys*, the character Wil Anderson dies after being shot five times, but later the cowboys cannot locate his grave.

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, the character Andy Dufresne unjustly spends weeks in isolation (symbolic of death and burial), but then leaves behind an “empty tomb” after his escape.

In *The Matrix* (1999), the character Neo literally does die and comes back to life stronger than before in his final fight with Agent Smith.

4. *The character functions in some way that is redemptive to other characters in the film.* This may be expressly stated as such. For example, the comments of the cowboy/narrator at the conclusion of *The Big Lebowski* (1998) indicate that the character the Dude somehow functions in a way that is salvific: “The Dude abides. I don’t know about you, but that gives me comfort. Nice to know he’s out there, the Dude, taking ‘er easy for all us sinners.” Other examples:

The characters Luke in *Cool Hand Luke* and Andy Dufresne in *The Shawshank Redemption* inspire hope in the prisoners who identify with them.

In *Dirty Harry*, the character Harry Callahan saves a busload of children (and society at large) from the killer.

In *The Omega Man*, the character Robert Neville literally gives his blood for the woman whom he loves and for the future of all humanity.

In *The Matrix* series, the character Neo saves humanity from its enslavement to machines.

5. *Sacramental imagery which calls to mind baptism and/or the Lord's Supper.* Examples:

In *Cool Hand Luke*, the other prisoners “feed off” of Luke by eating the rice off of his plate in order to save him from having to spend a night in the box.

In *The Dirty Dozen*, there is a “last supper” sequence that intentionally appears to mimic Da Vinci’s painting, with the Christ-figure in the center and six apostles on either side.

In *The Cowboys*, the boys steal a bottle of whiskey from Wil Anderson to share with one another together in a circle; later Anderson and Mr. Nightlinger secretly join the boys in drinking this whiskey.

In *The Matrix*, Neo is immersed in water after his release from the matrix; later he shares a common meal with the other rebels.

6. *There may be a direct or indirect reference to Jesus himself regarding this character's identity and function.* Another character may explicitly refer to the Christ-figure as “Jesus.” Very often in these films another character will utter the words “Jesus” or “Jesus Christ” as an expletive, but in such a way that there is the appearance of addressing the Christ-figure with these titles. Examples:

Early in *The Matrix*, the character Trey refers to Neo as “my savior, my personal Jesus Christ.”

During the showdown in the western *Tombstone* (1993) with Curly Bill Brosius, one of the villains shouts out “Jesus Christ” after Wyatt Earp miraculously guns down Brosius; later Doc Holliday likens Wyatt Earp to Jesus “walking on water.”

In *Dirty Harry*, when the killer first encounters Harry Callahan in a gunfight, Harry is under a revolving neon sign that reads “Jesus Saves” on all four sides. Later, before the final showdown, the killer sees Harry in the distance waiting for him on a bridge and exclaims “Jesus! What is he doing up there?”

In *Gran Torino*, the priest exclaims “Jesus, what did you do?” when the character Walt Kowalski comes to confession and then again afterward “Jesus Christ!” when Walt leaves.

7. *Other characters in the film may resemble characters from the Gospel narratives—disciples, authority figures, Satan, Mary, and so on.* Often in such films the Christ-figure will have a group of followers/disciples who become close associates/partners; sometimes these characters are associated with certain disciples of Jesus. Often in these films there will be characters who represent the authorities, Satan, or others from the Gospel narratives. Examples:

In *The Dirty Dozen* there are twelve inmates who are the disciples of Lee Marvin's Christ-figure. Among these twelve is an "inner circle of three" (the characters played by Clint Walker, Jim Brown, and Charles Bronson), a "doubting Thomas" (the character played by John Cassavetes), and a "Judas-traitor" (the character played by Telly Savalas). The senior officers function as the hostile authority figures.

In *Cool Hand Luke* the character Dragline and in *The Shawshank Redemption* the character Red function as "the Peter/Paul apostle." At the conclusion of *Cool Hand Luke*, Dragline, while in chains, rehearses the story of Luke's death to inspire hope in the others. In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Red narrates the entire story. In both films the prison guards and the warden can be seen to represent the hostile religious authorities (and perhaps the satanic forces as well).

8. *Events in the narrative of the film reflect events in the Gospel accounts.* Such events may include scenes where the Christ-figure is baptized, tempted to sin or to forsake the role as Christ-figure, ascends or is glorified in some way, and so on. Scenes may simply parallel other specific scenes in the Gospel narratives. Examples:

In *Cool Hand Luke*, there is a key scene where the character Luke is rejected by his mother and brother that arguably parallels Mark 3:20–21.

In *The Dirty Dozen* (as mentioned above) the major and his twelve disciples share a "last supper" before they depart on their mission, a scene that intentionally resembles Christian art that depicts Jesus and the twelve at the last supper.

In *Dirty Harry* the character Harry Callahan is "baptized" into his role when he confronts bank robbers by passing through water gushing from a broken fire hydrant. In the background there is a Gospel song with the lyrics "following Jesus as Lord" playing (softly).

At the conclusion of *The Matrix*, after his death and resurrection, the character Neo ascends into the sky.

B. Type of Portrayals of the Christ-Figure

With every Christ-figure film, as with the Jesus-films, there is a challenge to the Christian believer to consider how the Christ-figure is depicted, how this character fulfills his role as “Christ,” and what this says about the filmmaker’s perspective. To what degree does this presentation reflect the understanding of Jesus and the Christian message by the culture that surrounds us? Has this film had a role in shaping the understanding of Jesus and the Christian message? To what degree is this understanding of Jesus and the Christian message reflected in the beliefs of the members of our congregations and our fellow believers? The unique challenge of Christ-figure films is that if Jesus himself is not depicted as a character, it may not appear as if a Christology is being directly presented in this film. Nevertheless, such films have the potential of influencing the viewers’ understanding of Jesus and his ministry inasmuch as they offer a view of what it means to be a Christ-figure, by offering their own unique Christology.

Here are a few examples of portrayals of “Christ” in Christ-figure films:

Christ as Rebel against the System: A main function of the Christ-figure is to challenge a system of authority that is tyrannical, unjust, oppressive, and so on. Examples: *Cool Hand Luke*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *The Big Lebowski*, and *The Matrix*.

Christ as Promised/Messianic Deliverer: A main function of the Christ-figure is to fulfill the role of deliverer of humans (or some other species or race), often from a threat that can be viewed as global/universal. In this characterization there is often some notion of promise or messianic expectation attached to the Christ-figure. Examples: *The Terminator* (1984), *The Matrix*, *Happy Feet* (2006), *Children of Men* (2006), and *Avatar* (2009).

Christ as the Savior of Mankind: Closely related with the above portrayal, a main function of the Christ-figure is to be the savior of others, often from a threat that can be viewed as global/universal. The difference between this category and the one above is that there is no notion of promise or messianic expectation attached to the Christ-figure. Examples: *The Omega Man and Wall-E* (2008).

Christ as Hero (or even “All American Hero”): Also related to the above two portrayals, a main function of the Christ-figure is simply to be a hero who saves people, yet not on a global/universal level. Examples: *Die Hard* (1988) and *Spider Man 2*.

Christ as Friend of Sinners/Criminals/Outcasts: A main function of the Christ-figure

is to identify with, help, deliver, or provide hope and new purpose to other characters who are known sinners, often criminals, and even prisoners. Examples: *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), *Cool Hand Luke*, *The Dirty Dozen*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, and *The Green Mile* (1999).

Christ as Teacher, Mentor, or Father-figure: A main function of the Christ-figure is to provide guidance and instruction to other, often younger characters. Examples: *The Cowboys* and *Gran Torino*.

Christ as Agent of Divine Wrath: A main function of the Christ-figure is to bring justice to sinners, criminals, and evil-doers. Examples: *Dirty Harry*, *High Plains Drifter* (1973), *Pale Rider* (1985), and *Tombstone*.

Christ as Leader of His Own Unique Community: A main function of the Christ-figure is to form a community of people—a “church,” so to speak—that is distinct from the rest of society. Examples: *The Dirty Dozen*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), and *Bronco Billy* (1980).

Conclusion

There are numerous films that can be classified as Christ-figure films. Many (though not all) are culturally significant films that reflect the beliefs and values of American culture and also affect and shape the beliefs and values of American culture. Nevertheless, one may ask of what practical use this knowledge is for the Christian believer, pastor, and theologian. I would like to conclude by presenting several thoughts.

First, both Jesus-films and Christ-figure films provide a window into our American popular culture. What do many of our neighbors actually think and believe about our Lord Jesus Christ and his mission? These films are evidence of these thoughts and beliefs. Any film will reflect the beliefs and values of its makers, yet popular films will often also align with the beliefs and values of the wider culture and so reflect those beliefs and values. If a Christ-figure film presents a Christology, then there are likely some people who, for better or for worse, share this perspective on Jesus and the Gospel, at least to an extent.

It is noteworthy, for instance, to find that the portrayal of “Christ as rebel against the system” pervades many Christ-figure films even where it is not the major portrayal. For instance, this theme is found not only in the four films that I list above, but to some degree also in *The Dirty Dozen*, *Dirty Harry*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, *Die Hard*, and *Avatar*. In these (and other) films, the Christ-figure finds himself at odds with the authorities and their rules, regulations, and traditional ways of doing things, and, ironically, this is the case even when the Christ-figure himself also represents law,

justice, and order. Even when he is a man of the law, the Christ-figure is still a rebel. This is evidence that in our culture there is an understanding that Jesus too can be understood as a rebel who took on the authorities and their way of doing things—and that this was a good thing. Whether or not this is a faithful christological understanding is another question, yet this perspective on Jesus is held by many people in the surrounding culture or it would not be reflected repeatedly in films. Yet, Jesus is also viewed as a friend of sinners and outcasts, the savior of mankind, and also, ultimately, the agent of God's wrath.

It is noteworthy also that the Jesus-films which I classify as higher Christology and lower Christology often find different audiences. While Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, a film with a low Christology, was praised by Americans on the political and theological left, conservative Americans protested at its release. This situation was reversed, however, with the release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, a film with a decidedly high Christology (it even portrays the resurrection!). One can detect both the political and theological divide that permeates our culture by considering these two separate Jesus-films and how they were accepted.

The point of this discussion is that any Christian believer, pastor, or theologian can learn much about how Jesus and the Gospel is understood by many of our neighbors by considering the portrayal of Jesus or Christ-figures in these films.

A second point is that understanding these films can be a useful tool in communicating the Gospel with our neighbors. In my own experience, I have found the use of film to be an effective means to engage other Christians in discussion of our Lord Jesus Christ, the gospel, and even the canonical Gospels. This has been true during my time in the parish, in my work with students at this Seminary, and in my work with my fellow believers in local congregations. Yet I have also found that using films has been an effective means to discuss the gospel with outsiders, and this is especially true of Christ-figure films.

For instance, I once encountered a woman who was decidedly not a Christian believer yet knew that I teach at Concordia Seminary and that I like to watch movies. This woman asked me if I had seen the Marvel film *The Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014). I told her that I had and then also responded with a simple statement: "You know that it is a Christ-figure film, right?" Intrigued, this woman asked me to explain. For the next few minutes, I explained how both the characters Groot and Star Lord were Christ-figures. In particular, I told her how Groot reflects the work of Jesus by speaking in "I AM" statements, sacrificing himself for his friends, saving his friends by incorporating them into himself, and then dying and rising again. I pointed out that Groot, as a living tree, reflects the cross of Jesus Christ. In this way I was able to talk with her about Jesus's ministry, his sacrificial death and resurrection, and how Christians are incorporated into Jesus through baptism, and so on—and she listened intently and asked numerous questions. If I had simply approached her and

asked if I could witness Jesus to her, she likely would not have wanted to engage in the conversation. Yet while discussing *Guardians* with her, we spoke at length, and she allowed me to witness the gospel to her.

Both Jesus-films and Christ-figure films provide us not only with a better understanding of how the culture that surrounds us understands Jesus and his mission, but it enables us to effectively engage that culture and witness the gospel to our neighbors.

Finally, it is enlightening to find that filmmakers—both believers and unbelievers—find it effective to use elements of the Gospel narratives of Jesus’s life and mission when they tell their own stories on film. This should inform every Christian believer, pastor, and theologian that even outsiders find something profound and effective in the message to which we are called to bear witness. In this we find motivation to faithfully witness and proclaim to our neighbors the message of God reconciling sinners to himself through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Endnotes

- 1 W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* (Lehi, UT: Polebridge Press, 1997), 1.
- 2 Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, 1–2.
- 3 Film can be both reflective and affective in that it can reflect the beliefs and values of the culture that produces it (reflective) and then shape and even change the beliefs and values of the culture that views it (affective).
- 4 Tatum in his book also refers to the way that many of these films have been and are used as a venue by which to study Jesus's person and work in churches and universities today. See Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, vii–viii.
- 5 Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, 17–19. Tatum refers to these as “Jesus-story films”; I prefer to call them simply “Jesus-films.”
- 6 Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, 209–213. In his book Tatum does not treat this subgenre in depth.
- 7 Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, 177–188.
- 8 Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, 12–14.
- 9 It is interesting to note further that Matthew was designed to be watched over a longer period of time, not in a single setting. *John* is nearly four hours long, yet on the DVD there is a two-hour option that abridges the material by about fifty percent. One reason why a theatrical release of a film based on Matthew, Luke, or John would be abridged is for the sake of time. Thus *Matthew* (1964) and *Jesus*, while already long films as they stand, are nevertheless abridged versions of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke—abridged for the sake of time.
- 10 At least for Mark's account, if the reader were to “fill in the gap” by considering what Jesus might have said, the only evidence from the Gospel of Mark at this point would be the content of his preaching in Mark 1:15. This, however, has never been done in any film that depicts this scene.
- 11 In *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, in this sequence the character Jesus teaches on the importance of mercy and forgiveness for sinners. He concludes his teaching by healing a lame man in the synagogue (a fictional miracle) when in the Gospel accounts he instead casts an unclean spirit out of a man. This teaching ultimately results in the repentance of Matthew, the tax-collector, who follows Jesus to the synagogue to hear his teaching. In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Jesus teaches on the spiritual nature of God's law, how it is written on hearts, not stone. This sequence does include an exorcism, but it is made to look more like the exorcism of the boy after the transfiguration than the exorcism found in Mark 1 and Luke 5.
- 12 Note that this evaluation does not necessarily pertain to one's evaluation of any film as a work of art. For instance, a viewer can be impressed by the “neo-realism” used in Pasolini's *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* and consider this “a good film” while still acknowledging that the director's atheism may detract from his film's presentation of Jesus. On the other hand, a viewer can argue that *King of Kings* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* are not “great films” even while acknowledging that the directors were attempting to present a higher Christology.

Engaging Natural Theology Through Popular Culture

Joshua Hollmann



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of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and is working on two books, *Theology and Wes Anderson* and *Natural Theology and Pop Culture*.

A *Secular Age* by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor explores the contemporary religious scene in North America.¹ Taylor’s now prominent premise posits that our secular age is actually spiritually diffuse and drawn from religious reservoirs of Christian past. *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* by James K. A. Smith transmits and applies the central points

of Taylor’s *A Secular Age* for pastors and church workers.² In summarizing Taylor’s metanarrative, Smith concludes that conversions to Christianity in our secular age are reconversions back to the social imaginaries of medieval and early modern Christian worldviews.³ While both Taylor and Smith warn of the allure of nostalgia, they nonetheless affirm that secularism in the Western globalized world is complex, contextual, and concordant with traditional Christian formularies of faith and reason.

Taylor’s delineation of our secular age (1500 to the present)⁴ includes two cultural epochs: the age of mobilization (c. nineteenth century and early- to mid-twentieth century, featuring civic institutions and cohesion), and the age of authenticity (c. 1968 to the present, featuring self-awareness and expression).⁵ The age of mobilization parallels the origins and growth of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, while the age of authenticity coincides with the current challenges for Christian denominations in North America. The spirituality of the age of mobilization centered on confessions and organizations of faith, while the spirituality of the age of authenticity is expressed in journeys and experiential quests.⁶ Inclusive

of industrialization and the infusion of information and mass-media technologies and social networks, the ages of mobilization and the age of authenticity activated the rise of popular culture. The twentieth-century literary and cultural theorist Walter Benjamin sees that art has moved from icon to impression, mimesis to mimicry, and signifies reproduction and mass appeal.⁷ Benjamin identifies the roots of the art of technological reproduction in religious icons and ancient Greek concepts of beholding and befitting beauty.⁸ Taylor describes this shift away from transcendence

Natural theology enhances the Christian understanding of God in faith and reason.

in terms of the immanent frame, which permits closure to the transcendent and also remains open to experiences of “self-transformation beyond the everyday.”⁹ Whereas *Great Expectations* (1861), published as a serial by Charles Dickens in the age of mobilization, traces providence in Pip’s journey and resolution; viewers search

heuristically for connections and conclusions in Hayao Miyazaki’s anime classic and age of authenticity film *Spirited Away* (2001). From age of mobilization pulpy stories to age of authenticity trendy movies, popular culture functions as medium for conversations about the master craftsman, God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is not far from all and sends rain on the good and the bad (Acts 17:27; Mt 5:45).

Natural theology seeks to learn about God through his creation both in nature (without), and human nature (within).¹⁰ Natural knowledge of God by reason, or natural theology, has severe deficiencies and stark limitations due to the sinful-fallen world (without) and sinful-fallen human nature (within), and is not in any way at all sufficient for salvation which is revealed in God’s word. However, even given these limitations, natural theology may not need to be altogether discarded or avoided in a secular age. In *Nature’s Case for God*, John Frame helpfully puts natural theology in biblical perspective. Citing Psalm 19:1–4 and Romans 1:18–21, Frame observes how these passages describe a universal knowledge of God.¹¹ Frame writes that even people who don’t read the Bible know God and are responsible for their unbelief.¹² Indeed, Frame intends his short work on natural theology to lead non-Christians toward faith in Jesus and to strengthen the faith of those who already believe.¹³ Christians affirm natural theology because the Bible affirms natural theology. In a secular age, where, as Taylor contends, religion remains on the horizon of areligion, Christians may prudently and humbly apply biblical starting points of natural theology for witnessing to non-Christians the truths that the Scriptures reveal.¹⁴ For Christians, natural theology amplifies the truths of Scripture and reverberates as surround sound for the clear lyrics of the gospel. Natural theology thus enhances the Christian understanding of God in faith and reason. For non-Christians, natural theology

may sound as background music for receiving the gospel and beckon a familiar tune without words like *Amazing Grace* played on bagpipes at official civic funerals. Even though the words of *Amazing Grace* are often not known, the tune lingers and longs to land on the Christian lyrics.¹⁵ In a less direct but no less dramatic way, the father-son moral relationship character typology of yearning for forgiveness, justice and reconciliation—from Darth Vader (*Star Wars*) to Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) and Royal Tenenbaum (*The Royal Tenenbaums*)—signals a natural theology of meaning and order, good over evil, and seeking after the one Father who is over all and through all and in all.¹⁶ In addition, and accordant with orthodox Christian theology of the early church and the Middle Ages, a biblically based understanding of natural theology—while clearly noting the dangers of sin and the reality of total depravity—is affirmed in the Lutheran Confessions.¹⁷

This article presents an introduction for critically and constructively engaging natural theology through popular culture in order to provide missional reflection and contextual preparation (*praeparatio evangelica*) in a secular age for the kerygma of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in word and sacrament. While the Gospel of Christ does not need preparation, God the Father speaks his Word by the Spirit into the fallen world he created and into human bodies and souls which are made in his image. Gleaning insights from ancient Christian apologists, this article overviews the connections between natural theology and popular culture, as well as suggesting strategies for interpreting natural theology in popular culture and seeing examples of natural theology in classic and contemporary films. In a secular age, natural theology is no longer affirmed or acknowledged. As Scripture proclaims and Christians confess, God and conscience are known by faith and reason. Natural theology thereby procures starting points in a secular age for sacred conversations.¹⁸ The following discussion begins and ends with two Christian theologians of the early church who lived in a non-Christian age: Clement of Alexandria and Justin Martyr, and how their teachings on faith and reason matter today for sharing the hope that witnesses to the flourishing of the abundant, eternal life of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

Clement of Alexandria's Conjectures for Today on Natural Theology and Popular Culture

The early church apologist, Clement of Alexandria foundationally argued that philosophy and human reason in search of truth function as preparatory training for the enlightenment of the perfect word of God.²⁰ Profundities of philosophy and human conjectures on truth and meaning are expressed in popular culture. Just as William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the existential quandary of "to be or not to be" was once captivating and popular entertainment, so too today vexations on finding enduring significance in life are expressed in a range of pedestrian genres and mediums

This advent of religious searching is contemporaneous with the rise of pop culture.

from YouTube to podcasts, graphic novels, and comics.

What does natural theology have to do with pop culture? Popular culture is the accessible way natural theology is explored in our globalized, informationally intertwined world.

Natural theology has traditionally

addressed arguments for the existence of God on the basis of natural facts and human experience. As Alister McGrath contends, “The form that natural theology takes is critically dependent on its context,” the locus for what he calls the phenomenological diverse concept of an *imaginarium*.²¹ As we have seen, Taylor’s *A Secular Age* unfolds how our context is a spiritual age in which past religious impulses linger in yearnings for the possibility of human flourishing.²² As Taylor observes, “we are just at the beginning of a new age of religious searching.”²³ This advent of religious searching is contemporaneous with the rise of pop culture. John Storey notes that the phenomena of pop culture “only emerged following industrialization and urbanization.”²⁴ While faddish and prone to voyeurism, the popular culture industry is part of our increasingly urbanized and interconnected world of consumerism and entertainment. In this commercial context, Gordon Lynch prosaically defines popular culture as “the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life.”²⁵ Popular culture is the relevant and relatable way that the questions and quixotic pursuits of natural theology as the contemporary spiritual quest for human flourishing and meaning are articulated and visualized. While millions of North Americans eschew church and organized religion, they daily engage in various forms of popular culture. Classical loci of natural theology such as goodness, wisdom, and telos, are imagined, experienced, and expressed through pop culture narratives of meanings, rituals of community, and rites of passage.

In light of Clement of Alexandria’s dictum that human reason searches for the truth that ultimately the word of God reveals, the following forms of popular culture pose nexuses for Christian missional reflections and connections: (1) film and television as the making and medium of narratives of identity and meaning; (2) music, performance, and the aesthetics of beauty; (3) food, secular eucharists, and experiences of authentic community; (4) fandom, cosplay, and pop culture rites of passage.²⁶ Gordon Lynch shares critical and constructive criteria for evaluating these modes of theology and popular culture, which work well in small group discussions on films, television series, and books. Lynch asks, does the example of popular culture (i.e., TV series or film, and so on) offer a satisfying reflection of the varieties and veracities of human experience? Does it offer a valuable vision of the meaning of our lives? Does it encourage constructive relationships between people? Does it make

possible a sense of encounter with the transcendent?²⁷ And, in summation of Lynch's list, Christians add, how might it invite awareness of the need for salvation found only in the unique person and work of Jesus Christ as revealed and articulated in the word of God, the sacraments, Christian preaching, and the mutual consolation and conversation of Christians as they explicitly speak of Christ. While popular culture rarely if ever preaches Christ clearly, it sometimes solicits material for law-gospel focused discussions of sin and salvation in and through Jesus Christ alone as grounded in the Scriptures. Lynch contends for the ongoing need for theological criticism of everyday life and contemporary popular culture, or for meeting people where they are by engaging with what they are watching, reading, and listening to in a secular age.²⁸

Justin Martyr's Old Man and The Sea for Dialogue Today on Finding Meaning in Film

Justin Martyr recounts his journey to Christ through critically and constructively engaging an old man by the sea.²⁹ Justin, who liked to take long walks on the beach, is met by an older stranger who has been looking for missing members of his household.³⁰ The old man by the sea begins to dialogue with Justin on the meaning of life. With patience, persistence, and perspicuity, the old man points to the word of God. While Justin never saw the old man again, his heart was aflame with desire for Christ and Christian philosophy. Justin's personal conversion story attests to the power and potentiality of dialogue in Christian witness. The old man questions Justin on his foray into Peripatetic, Pythagorean, Stoic, and Platonist philosophy which guides him to Christ. In the ancient world, different schools of philosophy, such as Aristotle's Lyceum and Plato's

Academy, were popular contexts for learning ways of life. If Plato is now often relegated to arcane academic arguments, in Justin Martyr's day Platonic philosophy presented a path to wisdom which included both contemplation and action, theory and practice, and which also inspired Augustine of Hippo's own journey to Christianity.³¹ Today, visual media has

Today, visual media has overtaken texts, and film projects the natural human pursuit of meaning and truth in life.

overtaken texts, and film projects the natural human pursuit of meaning and truth in life.³² Echoing Justin Martyr's search for meaning, Jeanette Reedy Solano writes, "Films are our new myths, stories that grapple with the most fundamental of human dilemmas and attempt to answer big existential questions such as where did we come from?, how ought we live?, how did the world begin? and what happens after we

die?”³³ On these primary questions, Christians may approach film as a pathway of dialogue (*dia-logos* or through the word) about Jesus, the *Logos* (Word of God).

In line with Clement of Alexandria, the fifteenth-century Christian theologian Nicholas of Cusa posits on natural theology that all human knowledge is conjecture which seeks after the truth of God.³⁴ These human conjectures and approximations as screened on film illumine missional reflection and dialogue. For example, the classic film *Casablanca* explores the tensions between ethics, eros, and agape, while *No Country for Old Men* grapples with apocalyptic fears and cosmic justice. In Justin Martyr’s personal conversion story, the Christian interlocutor is key, the wise one, who discerns themes of meaning in the popular culture of one’s day and who also believes, teaches, and confesses that Jesus is Lord. In a secular age, Christian reflection might begin with a few guided questions on what society watches, listens to, and experiences. Popular art imitates popular questions on life. Popular stories of searching for meaning and truth such as the epistemology of *The Matrix* and the catharsis of *Toy Story*, conjecture on whatever is true, noble, and admirable (Phil 4:8). Engaging natural theology through popular culture makes for engaging natural theology. Even if the term natural theology may seem unexciting and off-putting, pop culture entertains the possibility for creatively and contextually understanding the signs of the times as opportune points of transition to announcing the unequivocal forgiveness, honor, and hope of God’s Word in Christ alone (Mt 16:3–4).

Endnotes

- 1 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).
- 2 James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).
- 3 Charles Taylor defines social imaginary as “the way that we collectively imagine, even pretheoretically, our social life in the contemporary Western world (*A Secular Age*, 146). See also, Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 134–135; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 728–755.
- 4 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 26.
- 5 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, chapter 12, “The Age of Mobilization” (423–472), and chapter 13, “The Age of Authenticity” (473–504).
- 6 Taylor writes, “The future of North Atlantic religion depends for one part on the concatenated outcomes of a whole host of such quests; and for another, on the relations, hostile, indifferent, or (hopefully) symbiotic, which will develop between modes of quest and centres of traditional religious authority” (*A Secular Age*, 532–533).
- 7 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 19–55. See also, with an artistic, architectural, and archetypal connection to Taylor’s Age of Mobilization, Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002); and for discussion on Benjamin’s *Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility* and film, see: Nico Baumbach, *Cinematopolitics/Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 1–16.
- 8 Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 24–25.
- 9 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 592. On the immanent frame and transcendence, Taylor writes, “We might even say that the depths which were previously located in the cosmos, the enchanted world, are now more readily placed within” (*A Secular Age*, 540). And, “The immanent order can thus slough off the transcendent. But it doesn’t necessarily do so . . . Some of us want to live it as open to something beyond; some live it as closed. It is something which permits closure, without demanding it (*A Secular Age*, 543–544). In addition, on art and the transcendent within the immanent frame, Taylor writes, “If we reach our highest goal through art and the aesthetic, then this goal, it would appear, must be immanent. It would represent an alternative to the love of God as a way of transcending moralism. But things are not so simple. God is not excluded. Nothing has ruled out an understanding of beauty as reflecting God’s work in creating and redeeming the world” (*A Secular Age*, 359).
- 10 Cf., Immanuel Kant’s epitaph from his grave in Kaliningrad (taken from his *Critique of Practical Reason*): “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily reflection is occupied with them: the starry heaven above me and the moral law within me.”
- 11 John M. Frame, *Nature’s Case for God: A Brief Biblical Argument* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018). See also: *Everyday Apologetics: Answering Common Objections to the Christian Faith*, ed. Paul Chamberlain and Chris Price (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).
- 12 Frame, *Nature’s Case for God*, 6.
- 13 Frame, *Nature’s Case for God*, 13.
- 14 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 592.
- 15 *Lutheran Service Book*, 744; Luke 15:24; Romans 7:24; 2 Corinthians 9:14; Ephesians 2:7.
- 16 Ephesians 4:6; See also: Frame, *Nature’s Case for God*, chapter 4, “The Goodness,” 49–56.
- 17 AC XVIII; FC SD II.
- 18 Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:18–32.
- 19 1 Peter 3:15; John 10:10; John 17:3.
- 20 Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, excerpted in the excellent collection of primary sources for teaching

- on faith and reason, *Readings in Philosophy of Religion: Ancient to Contemporary*, ed. Linda Zagzebski and Timothy D. Miller (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 491.
- 21 Alister E. McGrath, *Re-Imagining Nature: The Promise of a Christian Natural Theology* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 2. For other recent works on natural theology see: N. T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology, The 2018 Gifford Lectures* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019). Russell Re Manning, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- 22 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 17–18.
- 23 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 535.
- 24 John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, 8th ed. (London: Routledge, 2018), 12.
- 25 Gordan Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 21. For an example of the possibility of deeper level meaning and reflection on an aspect of popular culture, see: Simon May, *The Power of Cute* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2019.
- 26 On rites of passage, ritual theory, and popular culture see: Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply Into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
- 27 Lynch, *Understanding Theology*, 191.
- 28 Lynch, *Understanding Theology*, 193.
- 29 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, an accessible version of which is found in *Readings in Philosophy of Religion: Ancient to Contemporary*, 481–486.
- 30 Cf., John 10:16.
- 31 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VII.
- 32 For an introductory overview on film and theology and film and religion, see: Jeanette Reedy Solano, *Religion and Film: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2022), for the sociological angle, Brent S. Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); and for a theological vantage, Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), and Robert K. Johnston, Craig Detweiler, Kutter Callaway, *Deep Focus: Film and Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019). For a brief but fascinating meditation on film and religion, see: Nathaniel Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, CA: Tuumba Press, 2014).
- 33 Solano, *Religion and Film: The Basics*, 5.
- 34 Nicholas of Cusa, *De coniecturis*, prologue.

*Homiletical
Helps*

Anatomy of a Sermon

A Sermon on Luke 12:13–21

By Brian King

David Peter

Everyone loves a story. For this reason, most people are pleased to hear sermons that are based on parable texts from the gospels. Indeed, many pastors enjoy preaching on these short stories that originated from Jesus’s lips.

Yet it doesn’t take long for a thoughtful preacher to discover how challenging it is to preach on parables. Thomas Long comments: “Preaching on a parable is a novice preacher’s dream but often an experienced preacher’s nightmare.”¹ Preaching the meaning of a parable with competence and integrity is more demanding than initial appearances.

It can be challenging to preach on parable texts because of the difficulties in interpreting them and in communicating their intended meaning. In this sermon—Pastor Brian King demonstrates how both outcomes can be achieved in a way that engages a contemporary audience. He expounds Jesus’s parable of the “Rich Fool” from Luke 12:13–21. This was one of a series of sermons based on parables in Luke’s Gospel (chapters 10 through 18). In this sermon Pastor King attends to both the narrative in the parable and the narrative of the context in which the story was told (what he calls the “backstory”) in order to communicate the message of the text and to proclaim law and gospel to the hearers.

We value families around here. I hope that’s something that you know. Family time together is important, time to bond.

Editor’s note

The sermon, preached at Webster Gardens Lutheran Church in Webster Groves, Missouri, on July 10, 2022, is represented in italic type which can be read all at once by following the gray bars.

Families do that in different ways. Maybe your family does puzzles. Or you play cards.

Lots of families play board games. [Display board game boxes]

Anybody play Candyland?

Maybe classics like Chutes and Ladders?

Not all board games are created equal or bring people together in the same sense of caring and lightheartedness.

Like “Sorry”—(the sarcasm is built right into the title!)

But no game threatens to tear apart the fabric of the family like . . . Monopoly.

Does anybody play this? Do you still speak to each other?

Monopoly was designed to tear families apart. It’s cutthroat! You play this game, and your 9-year-old immediately transforms into a cigar-chomping tycoon.

The introduction to this sermon accomplishes four ends. First, it affirms a prominent value of the congregation—upholding the family (Brian King is the pastor of family life at this church). Second, it introduces the major image that will unite the sermon—the game of Monopoly. Third, it connects with the hearers by relating to their shared experiences of playing board games. Fourth, and most importantly, it unites these foci to describe how family members who play the game often end up at enmity with one another. This in turn will open the hearers to relate to the setting of the biblical text—the enmity between brothers over money.

The statement that “no game threatens to tear apart the fabric of the family like Monopoly” sets the stage for the scene in the biblical text about a brother who is enraged about his share of the inheritance. But before that scene is expounded, the preacher develops the major image of the Monopoly game, describing the dynamics of the board game that will move forward the sermon’s theme.

And we not only own Monopoly, we have “Catopoly,” “Monopoly: Animal Crossing Edition.”

You can dress it up however you want, it still doesn’t change the fact that someone’s gonna walk away with everything,

all their own properties,

and everyone else’s properties,

and houses and hotels piled up in front of them,

with all the colorful money.

And everyone else is going DOWN! Slowly and painfully.

And it doesn’t matter what your house rules are—(“free parking gets the community chest pot!”), one person leaves happy and everyone else is in a rage.

Here Pastor King develops the master image or metaphor for the sermon, that of

playing the game of Monopoly. He refers to various versions of the board game, and he describes the outcomes of playing the game—the winner takes all the wealth while the losers are resentful. He purposefully selects and manages aspects of the image—the details about playing the game—in order to relate these to the opening situation in the Lucan text.

The master image of Monopoly will support the central theme and movement of the entire sermon. Prominent scholars in homiletics affirm the value of using such an overarching metaphor. Paul Scott Wilson calls this the *dominant image* by which listeners “see the same image in a sermon introduction, on one or two other pages, and in the conclusion.”² Peter Jonker labels this rhetorical device the *controlling image*, defining it as “an evocative picture or scene that shows up repeatedly in a sermon and communicates either the trouble or the grace of a sermon theme, therefore helping to accomplish the sermon’s goal.”³ The dominant or controlling image appears not only in one section of the sermon, it pervades the sermon as a whole. It directs how the entire sermon will be visualized and understood.

If you’ve played Monopoly, maybe you’ve felt like this guy who kicks off Jesus’s parable. He didn’t just come from a brutal round of playing Monopoly, he’s enraged with his family about a real conflict over money. He comes to Jesus (Jesus is actually right in the middle of teaching) and says, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide what our father left us!”

We don’t know all the details, but it’s clear he feels like he’s on the losing end of the game.

Jesus pivots his teaching. First, he’s like, “Who elected me judge of this case? I didn’t know I was up for the position!” And then proceeds to tell a story you just heard, often referred to as the “Parable of the Rich Fool.”

At this point Pastor King uses the image of Monopoly to move to the biblical text and its opening scene. This is what he will later call the “backstory” to the parable. This backstory is the dialogue between Jesus and the man who complains about his brother, the context in which Jesus tells the parable. Understanding that context is critical to apprehend the meaning and application of this parable.

When such a historical or literary context—the “backstory”—is provided by the biblical author, the preacher will want to examine it for the sake of interpreting the parable. This may involve, as in this case, a mere retelling of the context before narrating the parable. This approach reserves explanation of the context’s significance to a later point in the sermon. Another option is to more thoroughly expound the implications of the “backstory” before embarking on the parable itself. In any case, this contextual material should not be neglected. It is key to understanding the parable.

But rather than losing, Jesus's story is about a guy who's winning. "There was once a rich man who had land which bore good crops."

It's more than he expected! It's like he's watching his properties and hotels pile up in front of him; it's exciting!

Now, in this story, Jesus is not saying this was a bad man. No evidence that he swindled people out of what was theirs, nothing that says that he was trying to sneak hotels onto Park Place AND Boardwalk while nobody was looking.

But he has some flaws. He's the only character in this story, but there's a conflict.

The rich man uses the wrong pronouns. (How current does that sound?) People argue about the place and purpose of personal pronouns, but look at this rich man:

Let's put his inner monologue up on the screen. Looking at the screen or in your Bible, count up the times he uses the pronouns "I/ME/MY."

"I don't have a place to keep all my crops. What can I do? This is what I will do, I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, where I will store the grain and all my other goods. Then I will say to myself, Lucky man! You have all the good things you need for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink, and enjoy yourself!"

He uses the pronouns "I/ME/MY" at least ten times! Even more if you count the "you's" where he's talking to himself.

He wants more room and more stuff and more convenience. He did not look at his possessions as ways to bless others.

And so, in this short, three-act story, the man comes into great wealth, he makes plans to keep it safe all to himself, and then God shows up and says, "You're dead!" (That show isn't going to have a season two. He's DONE!)

The typical parables of Jesus are "short past-time narratives in form."⁴ That is certainly the case with this parable. Because it is a narrative, it consists of both character and plot. In retelling and expounding the parable, the preacher can examine its characters or its plot, or both.

Here Pastor King minimally engages the plot, assuming that the hearers are adequately familiar with it. He summarizes the plot succinctly in one sentence as a "three-act story." What he primarily develops is the character of the rich man. He clarifies that the rich man is not technically corrupt, but the preacher articulates the character's flaws by analyzing his inner thoughts. Pastor King diagnoses the character's selfish and sinful orientation.

It is uncommon for biblical narratives to do extensive character development. This is especially true of short parables. But contemporary audiences resonate toward character development; it helps them identify with the characters and enter into the story. This is why it is frequently advantageous in preaching parables to elaborate on

and even expand the description and analysis of main characters in the story.

Notice also how this section of the sermon alludes to the master image of the Monopoly game in the retelling of the parable's narrative when it states, "he's watching his properties and hotels pile up in front of him," and as it refers to sneaking hotels onto Park Place and Boardwalk.

So what's this about?

One layer of this story IS a warning against greed. Jesus said, "watch out for it, it's sneaky!"

However, Jesus's point doesn't seem to be that ownership is evil, or you should sell everything that you have. In other parts of God's word there are several encouragements to save for the future.

But by contrasting this man's untimely death with all the stuff he's not going to be able to enjoy for himself, one thing Jesus IS conveying is that these things are less important than you think.

There's a profound wisdom in Jesus's prayer "Give us this day our daily bread . . ." My daily bread is less likely to balloon into a god.

And so, Paul instructs his friend Timothy, a young pastor, with these words: "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17).

The rich man mistook the uncertain for the certain.

That's instructive, for your bank account, stock portfolio, and hobbies you spend your money on.

Pastor King signals the focus of this parable by asking, "What's this about?" This also signals the approach to preaching this parable that he will take. The approach is to isolate and identify a specific truth or teaching for reflection and application. This is called "preaching the teaching" of the parable. This approach involves identifying the teaching that Jesus intends to communicate and then developing that teaching by clarifying, explaining, analyzing, applying, or proving it.

Such an approach to this parable is particularly appropriate because it does not have a deeper (allegorical) level of meaning to it that is typical of many parables. This parable is more of a teaching story in which the application is on the surface rather than at a sublevel. God explicitly addresses the rich man as a fool for his misplaced priorities (v. 20). In its literary context Jesus warns against greed and expressly devalues the abundance of possessions (v. 15). Finally, Jesus appends a moral to the story by condemning the one who values earthly riches over the riches of God (v. 21).

Accordingly, Pastor King identifies the initial teaching as a warning against greed. Then he homes in more specifically on misplaced values. He proceeds to relate this

to idolatry (“balloon into a god”) and our source of security. The parable is used to communicate an important teaching about priorities in our lives—the folly of valuing material wealth over God.

Having articulated this teaching, Pastor King then uses it to proclaim the accusing law to his hearers. He warns against sin by quoting the Apostle Paul’s exhortation not to put hope in wealth and by directing the hearers to reflect on how they view their own finances and possessions.

But it’s not all we walk away with. Remember from last week, that a parable is not a delivery system for an idea, but a house where the listener is invited to take up residence.

So more than just a lesson on how I view and manage my possessions, Jesus invites us into this narrative house that he’s built. And when we do that, we actually see Jesus emerging from his own story.

In this brief section the preacher highlights a distinctive quality of the genre of parable. A parable does not merely communicate a concept; it evokes an experience. This evocative quality of story is imagined as entering into a house for the hearers to reside in. The approach of inhabiting the parable was explained more thoroughly during the previous sermon in the series, and so is only briefly mentioned here. Nonetheless, it demonstrates that the preacher acknowledges and engages one of the distinctive qualities of the literary type we call a parable—its evocative nature.

Most significantly, Rev. King uses this quality to proclaim the gospel by moving to a deeper reflection on Jesus. He states, essentially, that as we inhabit the parable more reflectively, we encounter Christ more thoroughly.

It’s kind of like when you’ve seen pictures like this where there’s lines or patterns, and it’s when you look at the negative space, you see the real meaning. [This image is shown on the screen:]



In this story, look for Jesus in the negative space, because Jesus is the “anti-rich fool.” You see him in the contrasts.

[The following slide is projected:]

Jesus is the “anti-rich fool”

THE RICH FOOL

*filled his barns
obsessed with “I/Me/My”
life was demanded of him*

JESUS

*Jesus “emptied himself.”
Jesus says “You/Your”
gives life to all who receive him.*

The rich man filled his barns (or at least he planned to). “Gotta keep this stuff safe, ready for me when I need it!”

*Well, what’s Jesus like? Paul writes to the Philippians—he has divine identity, everything is his. Barns filled to the top! And “he made himself nothing” (Phil 2:7). The literal word, *ekenosen*, **Jesus “emptied himself.”** What do you need? A right relationship with God. A certain identity. True belonging. That’s in Jesus’s barn. It’s yours. What a contrast.*

*Remember the rich fool’s pronouns? **The rich fool is obsessed with “I/Me/My”** “What will I eat what will I drink, how will I have a good time?”*

***Jesus says, “You/Your.”** “This is the blood of the covenant, shed for YOU for the forgiveness of YOUR sins . . .”*

The rich fool placed his hope, his identity in everything uncertain, and his life was demanded of him.

*Jesus, through his generosity, takes on your sins, your greed, your selfishness. **He gives life to all who receive him.***

The house rule for us to understand today is that in OUR house, we place our focus on Jesus, the One who emptied himself for us.

This is the first section of gospel proclamation. The pericope of Luke 12:13–21 contains no explicit gospel content, no promise of divine mercy or forgiveness. Jesus’s teaching convicts and condemns, not comforts. Nevertheless, Pastor King undertakes to use this law-laden text to deliver the gospel message.

He does so in a creative manner, by way of contrasting Jesus from the rich man (“You see him in the contrasts”). One way to proclaim the gospel from a text that contains only law is to contrast Jesus from the sin or sinner in the text and then to present Christ as the one who fulfills what sinners lack. Here the preacher transitions to this approach using the dynamic of negative space that is illustrated in the projected image of the name JESUS. He then highlights three characteristics of the rich man that are drawn from the parable, and he demonstrates the opposite

characteristics in Jesus. By articulating these characteristics of Christ, Pastor King is able to proclaim Jesus's self-sacrificial work that forgives sin and gives life. He directs the hearers to focus on the gracious characteristics and actions of Jesus that are revealed outside of the parable in a way that arises from the content inside the parable, thus delivering the gospel.

This concludes the first cycle of law-gospel proclamation. But there is more. A second cycle commences with a more direct application of the law to the hearers.

You know, maybe you have a hard time seeing yourself as the Rich Fool. He's such a caricature of the cigar-chomping Monopoly tycoon.

But you know who you and I are? The guy who asks Jesus about the inheritance. He's the really interesting one.

Remember from last week that backstory is important? Let's look at what was going on: We saw that there are these thousands gathered, squeezed in, stepping on each other to hear. What was Jesus teaching about?

Jesus was sharing about the power of God who has authority even over heaven and hell. But also assuring them that this same God knows every hair on their head. He promises them that the Holy Spirit himself will guide them when they're persecuted.

This man hears all this; we know because he's close enough to ask Jesus a question. And he blurts out "tell my brother to divide what our father left us!" He missed it.

This reminds me of a character in a classic book called Pilgrim's Progress, written in the 1600s so it's a challenging read. But it's an allegory of the Christian faith. And in one section of the book, we're introduced to this character who's described as a "man with a muck rake."

[The painting of a man with a muck rake is shown on the screen.]

He has a rake. All day long he's bent over. Raking up mud and sticks. Someone stands above him and offers to trade him his rake for a "celestial crown." You know what happens? He never looks up. And he ignores the offer. He's chosen what's important to him.

All this certain, eternal, heavenly truth is offered from God who has all authority, who also treasures you over many sparrows. And this guy is obsessed with "I didn't get my fair share!"

Earlier in the first cycle of law proclamation, Pastor King directed his hearers to identify with the character in the parable, the rich fool. But now he directs them to identify with the original person whose grievance prompted Jesus to tell the story. He associates the hearers with the character in the "backstory," the man who demanded that Jesus arbitrate his financial issues.

This is a clever rhetorical turn. The preacher now develops the setting of the backstory to develop his convicting message. The man introduced in verse 13 had been in the audience hearing Jesus's message of God's gracious power and promise, yet he missed it all to be consumed with mundane bitterness. So also, we often miss the grace of God to be focused on self-serving grievances. Pastor King holds up the mirror of the law so that sinners see themselves reflected in both the rich fool and the bitter brother, whose sin is further developed using the illustration of the muckraker. Thus, for a second time the preacher reveals sin, setting the scene to call the hearers to repent.

*In our house, we're honest before God, we don't try to look better than we are.
In our house, we place our focus on Jesus, the One who emptied himself for us.
We confess that we are like the rich fool, like the muckraker. Would you pray
with me to confess our sins? Let's use the words on the screen.*

[Slide projected]

***Lord, I allow greed and selfishness to block my view of your generosity.
I ignore your offer of true life, focusing only on what's in front of me. I've
exalted worries about my future to first place in my life. Forgive me for the
sake of Jesus, who emptied himself for me.***

*You and I are not rich toward God all the time. But Jesus, who emptied
himself for you, is rich toward you every time. He became nothing for you. He
emptied himself for you. He forgives you of your greed and selfishness and every
other sin. He gives you the riches of his righteousness.*

*He takes the rake out of your hand. He loosens your grip on those uncertain
things so you can grasp what's certain! He gives you something certain that you
can be confident in, that you belong to him, that you are important and valuable
to him.*

*You're forgiven. You're rich toward God. That's your identity in him!
In Jesus's name, Amen.*

In this concluding section of the sermon Pastor King explicitly calls for a response from his hearers. It is a salutary practice to conclude one's sermon by calling the hearers to respond according to the goal of the sermon, in this case to trust in Jesus rather than riches (faith goal).

But the intended response is also one of repentance over the sin they have just been convicted of, and they are given the opportunity to express that contrition by speaking words of confession. Typically, the Confession and Absolution are located at the beginning of the service immediately following the invocation (there are good reasons for this). But on occasion it is appropriate and meaningful to close a sermon with words of confession of sin and forgiveness that articulate the law-gospel message of the sermon. Pastor King demonstrates that kerygmatic strategy here.

Most importantly, the delivery of the word of absolution brings evangelical closure to the sermon. The words of forgiveness complete the second cycle of law-gospel proclamation. The first cycle of gospel proclamation focused on the grounds of forgiveness and life—Jesus’s emptying of himself to give righteousness. This final cycle of gospel proclamation more directly applies the gospel promises to the hearers, delivering the gifts of forgiveness and a new identity in Christ. The evangelical promise sends the hearers forth forgiven and fortified to focus on Jesus and their identity in him.

To summarize this analysis, Pastor King’s sermon based on the “Parable of the Rich Fool” from Luke 12:13–21 demonstrates the following qualities:

- It employs a dominant image (the Monopoly game) to introduce the theme of the sermon and unify that theme throughout.
- It engages the content of the parable—its plot and characters—but also understands its meaning in view of the literary context (the “backstory”).
- It develops the homiletical focus on a lesson to be taught (preaching the teaching of the parable) which is a warning against greed and misplaced priorities.
- It proclaims the gospel from a text that contains only law by using the strategy of contrast.
- It proclaims law and gospel twice by cycling through two iterations of proclamation, each with a distinctive approach to convict and comfort the hearers.
- It guides the hearers to respond to the message of the parable with repentance using words of confession followed by the announcement of forgiveness.

All of this is accomplished with creativity and in a conversational style that invites the hearers to inhabit the experience of Jesus’s parable.

Endnotes

- 1 Thomas Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 87.
- 2 Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 51.
- 3 Peter Jonker, *Preaching in Pictures: Using Images for Sermons that Connect* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 4.
- 4 Jeff Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34 Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 664.

Reviews

**CULTURAL APOLOGETICS:
Renewing the Christian Voice,
Conscience, And Imagination in
a Disenchanted World.** By Paul M.
Gould. Zondervan, 2019. Paper. 240
pages. \$22.99.

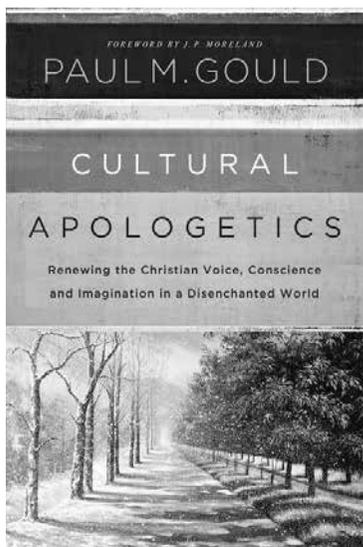
The relationship of the Christian church to culture has been a prickly question even since the first Jewish believers considered the requirements for Gentile converts. The debate continued as the early church encountered Roman and Greek culture and thought and has more recently intensified considerably in the postcolonial era. Central to the question of how the church interacts with culture is how the church views culture itself. Is it an evil to be avoided or a good to be enjoyed? In *Cultural Apologetics*, philosopher and professor Paul M. Gould lands somewhere in between to present his vision for the church's cultural engagement.

Gould laments that "Christianity suffers from an image problem" (18), grappling with a diminishing influence in an increasingly antagonistic culture. The problem, he contends, is not in culture, but in the church

itself. "The church has grown anti-intellectual and sensate," beholden to the disenchantment that pervades the western world, and thus losing its ability to say anything meaningful. Facing this problem, Gould offers cultural apologetics as "the work of establishing the Christian voice, conscience, and imagination within a culture so that Christianity is seen as true and satisfying" (21). That work proceeds

through a process of re-enchantment that begins with listening to culture itself. "For the cultural apologist, cultural artifacts—illustrations from the world of music, art, sports, entertainment, social relations, and politics—are paramount" (21). Unlike traditional apologetics which starts with Christianity's truth claims, Gould's cultural apologetics sees culture as a valid starting point for the church's theology and action.

When the church listens carefully to culture at the street level, recognized are three universal longings that serve as bridges by which the gospel can be brought to bear. First, humans long for beauty. Where some "hold beauty captive" for commercial purposes and others "exile beauty . . . with ambivalence or outright disdain" (98), the church must resist these impulses



and instead reclaim the theology and practice of godly beauty by re-activating *imaginations*. Christians must embrace their roles as creative cultivators, “bringing beauty back into our lives and into the church” (105). Concretely, Gould urges the church to utilize cultural art forms in preaching and teaching, to promote the arts in local churches, and to affirm artistic vocations as valuable.

Second, humans long for truth. While America has access to more information but paradoxically becomes increasingly anti-intellectual, the cultural apologist will awaken the longing for knowledge and truth by using God-given *reason* to present Christianity as something reasonable. With a starting posture of love and a starting point at the plausibility structures of culture itself, the church must recover the art of persuasion. For Gould, himself a professor, the American university, as “a center of power for the discovery of truth and the advancement of knowledge” (142), is the perfect and most important venue for this kind of reasoning.

Third, humans long for goodness. When it is all too apparent that the world is not as it should be, the church must “narrow the gaps between how things are and how things ought to be” (146) by affirming Christian *conscience*. Christianity gives each person a role to play in the story of a morally good God in which “our lives count for something bigger than ourselves” (155). That story does not permit the church to silo itself

off from the injustice in the world but rather compels us to engage injustice as a force for good.

Gould wraps this process of re-enchantment—listening to culture and awakening the three universal longings—in a larger story of returning to a lost home, as the place where one finds true belonging and wholeness. “We long for home, we are not home, and we can’t find our way home” (202), but in his mercy, God has made us a way home through Jesus. In this “apologetic of return,” as Christians engage in the work of restoring Christian voice, conscience, and imagination within culture, they function as “agents of shalom” who “help erect signposts for others on the way” (210).

In Gould’s treatment of how the church engages culture, the influence of Andy Crouch and James Davison Hunter are strong. On the other hand, cultural scholars like Lesslie Newbigin, Stanley Hauerwas, and more recently, Rod Dreher, might be nervous that in letting it set the church’s agenda, Gould is capitulating to culture. But Gould has no rosy notions about culture as an unvarnished good. Instead, he comprehensively argues that western culture has distorted reality. Nonetheless, he does not deem culture an irredeemable evil, but rather affirms even broken culture as a valid starting point for the church’s engagement and the arena for God’s redeeming work. Cultural apologetics is cultural in that culture provides the data for the church’s engagement, but it is apologetic in

that it seeks to present Christianity as both true and desirable in that cultural context. In this way, Gould's cultural apologetics has a missional core.

Gould's book is written at a level academic enough to engage with scholars and so should find a home in university settings. But it is also accessible enough for a wider readership. It will be most useful for American pastors and other church practitioners who want to think intelligently about their interaction with wider culture, especially as the church in America faces growing opposition.

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ASPECTS OF TRUTH: A New Religious Metaphysics. By Catherine Pickstock. Cambridge University Press, 2020. Hardcover. 340 pages. \$39.99.

Can Christianity survive a postmodernism that rejects the certainties of modernity and its destruction of any ruling narrative? Are subjectivity, relativity, and nihilism the only options that remain? Radical orthodoxy, as Catherine Pickstock explains in the preface to her work *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Blackwell Publishers, 1998), offers a third option between modernity's "benign, universal, rationalist humanism" and an "irredeemably nihilistic" secular postmodernism: "while conceding, with postmodernism, the indeterminacy

of all our knowledge and experience of selfhood, it [radical orthodoxy] construes this shifting flux as a sign of our dependency on a transcendent source which 'gives' all reality as a mystery, rather than as adducing our suspension over the void." Radical orthodoxy recognizes—in postmodern fashion—that absolute certainty of what is real cannot be grasped by reason, but also proposes that by retrieving the premodern Christian metaphysical tradition, a subject can find an anchor in reality by a gift from that which is transcendent. As one of the primary voices of radical orthodoxy, Pickstock brings her metaphysical approach to topics such as language and liturgy in *After Writing* and repetition, sign, and literature in *Repetition and Identity* (Oxford University Press, 2014). In this present volume, however, she addresses one of the most infamous casualties of postmodernity: truth.

The question once posed by a local governor to a man from Nazareth still has traction two millennia later: "What is truth?" (Jn 18:38). Today you will often hear people speak of "their truth" rather than "the truth," indicating the decay of a postmodernity that has departed from a belief in one absolute truth. In its place are many truths that are local, subjective, and relative. Pickstock does not see this crisis of truth, however, as the creation of postmodernity, but as a problem that has been bequeathed to it from the height of modernity. Since Kant's critique of pure reason, which confessed

that reason cannot comprehend a thing in itself, truth has become a matter of epistemology, observes Pickstock. Truth is a matter of what can be known rather than what is—something that must be grasped by the mind, something “out there,” an object of knowledge. In the twentieth century, Kant’s philosophical legacy further divides into an analytic tradition, which tries to apprehend truth in language and logic, and a continental tradition, whose quest for truth does not venture outside the brackets of phenomenological experience. Both efforts confine truth to immanence, which finally necessitates its relativity because it is cut off from a transcendent anchor.

Pickstock recognizes that, because of the problems and contradictions created by the collapse of truth into immanence (one might consider, for example, Russell’s paradox), late modern/postmodern thinking is more open to the transcendent as a path forward. Rather than a flight from absolute to relative truth, Pickstock finds the postmodern openness to a metaphysics more characteristic of premodern times to be a renewed opportunity to ground truth not in epistemology, but in ontology. Rather than an object to be apprehended by reason or the mind—something that is known—truth is the condition of knowing, which relates to being. Truth has a metaphysical basis in a horizontal participation between subject and object who share a mutual, vertical, and transcendent origin. Accordingly, the aspects of truth that

Pickstock wishes to emphasize are an appreciation of form as well as process, analogy, and mystery, and a reassertion of vertical participation without diminishing the horizontal. Recognition of the truth cannot be divorced from the realization of participation in the transcendent.

After a critique of several secular postmodern attempts at retrieving metaphysical realism, which variously locate truth in either being *or* knowing, Pickstock argues that these all eventually fall into a denial of truth because they either cannot escape the immanent frame with its duality of subject and object, or they hover in an atheistic emptiness. Even with an attempt to restore metaphysical depth, these “fancy realisms” (as she calls them) continue to threaten a return to subjectivism and nihilism. For truth, Pickstock argues that it is necessary not only for subject and object to conform to each other via knowing, but that each conforms its being to the infinite and eternal, which manifests itself in reality. In other words, truth arrives as a gift from God, which joins a transcendent, thinking soul with the reality of the world around it.

In her preface, Pickstock brings attention to an implication for this position, which she then explores in her postscript. Truth is not something that you know, but something that you bear witness to. Socrates, who courageously surrendered his life for the truth, serves as a parable for witnessing to an unknown, yet transcendent truth by death. In this context, Pickstock arrives

at a jolting conclusion. “The extremity or optimum pitch of subjective life is *witness* to the truth, which is a witness unto death. The road to truth is the Stations of the Cross” (xvii). This final sentence (which incidentally I read during Holy Week) promises to anchor Christian truth in a robust Christology centered around the incarnation and death of Jesus, where the transcendent God joins the immanent world in the singularity of the person of Jesus, whose witness to the truth before Pilate results in his death. Disappointingly, however, this bud withers before it blooms. Pickstock’s final conversation partner is the seventeenth-century English philosopher Anne Conway, who, after all the metaphysical speculation, finally invokes Christ as the incarnation of the truth. But she does not see the union of the divine nature with the human in the person of Christ as a touchstone for the conformation of subjects to objects and both subject and object to the eternal. Rather, she departs from Nicene orthodoxy into the kabbalistic idea of Adam Kadmon (primordial man) and references an eternal humanity of Christ. This Christology borders on a quasi-gnostic form of Arianism. Pickstock abandons the christological line of inquiry here, and the overall argument is poorer for it.

Despite this strange christological twist, Pickstock provides a compelling reflection on Pilate’s question. Truth is not something you know, but a transcendent reality that binds people to the world around them in a

mysterious way, because both people and the world participate as creatures in the eternal God. Truth is a gift from God. At the same time, truth is more than a speculative metaphysics of the completely unknown. The question of truth is, in fact, previously answered by the one whom Pilate questions. “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” says Jesus (Jn 14:6). Truth is situated between the way and the life and all hold together in the truth who became flesh, a unity of the stuff of the earth, a thinking soul, and the nature of God. To witness to this truth is to witness not only the way of the cross, but also the life of resurrection.

While much of the book deals with the speculative rather than the concrete—a challenge that is compounded by Pickstock’s deep well of vocabulary and her sometimes obscure argumentation, which assumes a thorough familiarity with the philosophical tradition—there is a great blessing for practicing theologians in chapter 4. “Sensing” treats liturgy as the location where bodily creatures, who are inhabited with a transcendent soul, unite with the eternal God, who gives of himself to the senses. Specifically in the eucharistic liturgy, the eternal and ineffable makes himself available in a concrete, bodily way. “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor 10:16). In this eucharistic participation, the one who worships

receives God's gift and enters into the way of truth that leads to life.

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YHWH IS THERE: Ezekiel's Temple Vision as a Type. By Drew N.

Grumbles. Wipf & Stock, 2021. Softcover. 260 pages. \$33.00.

Drew Grumbles's new book *YHWH Is There* is an invaluable resource for the study of the Old Testament prophets and for learning the prophetic mind and vision of the Old Testament. Adapted into book form from his PhD thesis of the same name, this study explores reading chapters 40–48 of Ezekiel with a typological view, that is, as a way to read the Old Testament and New Testament together as a cohesive whole, congruent with the view of Horace Hummel's Concordia Commentary *Ezekiel 21–48*. Since the goal of history, theologically speaking, is eschatology, Ezekiel's temple vision draws from and reaches into every part of both testaments. Grumbles's sums up his approach,

One reason so many scholars inappropriately view typology as retrospective is that they see typology as a hermeneutical strategy rather than a species of divine revelation, a subtle but important difference. . . . Typology exists because the divine Author, through the human author, placed the type within the text originally, not because the interpreter reads backwards and sees a text typologically (even if the

author is Paul). Typology should be a textual strategy rather than a reading strategy. (16–17)

He builds on the six criteria for typology expressed in Richard M. Davidson's *Typology in Scripture*: typology has structures that are (1) historical, (2) eschatological, (3) christological, (4) soteriological, (5) ecclesiological, and (6) prophetic. Typology must have a historical referent, a prophetic indicator (that a fulfillment is coming in the future), and an eschatological *Steigerung* ("heightening"—that there is a greater fulfillment than what is currently described). Grumbles adds three more criteria, that typology contains (7) ambiguity or dissonance (in that the text does not present an event, person, or institution in a completely straightforward manner); (8) epochal events, persons or institutions (with theological significance, relating to redemptive history); and (9) development within the wider Old Testament.

Grumbles emphasizes the importance of Ezekiel 40–48 in the theology of the temple as providing a transition from a physical temple and pointing forward typologically to a greater fulfillment. He explains how a type is different from a symbol. A type always has its basis in an actual event, person, or institution, while a symbol need not. The temple that God shows Ezekiel in Ezekiel 40–48 is "real," even though that reality does not require

that the visionary temple actually be built. Nor is the temple Ezekiel sees the same as John's vision in Revelation 21–22 of the holy of holies, the new Jerusalem and new Eden. These are anticipated by Ezekiel's vision, but not yet seen. Rather, the typological reading provides a transition for seeing God's dwelling as outside a physical building, showing that the institution written about is inherently pointing forward to a referent beyond itself, to a heightened fulfillment.

In the last two words of the book of Ezekiel, "YHWH Shammah" ("Yahweh Is There"), Yahweh himself gives a name to the goal of his salvation, the gospel for God's people in every time and place, God's promise of his presence with us. The temple in all its Old Testament iterations typologically points forward to Jesus as the eschatological temple (Jn 2:19–21), thus abolishing the need for a physical temple in the eschaton, as Revelation 21–22 demonstrates. John describes the very fulfillment that Ezekiel's temple points forward to, the greater temple of God's presence. The end of the Bible restores what was lost in the beginning, life with God in Eden.

Grumbles's book indeed details the framework God himself lays out through Ezekiel to show a holistic view of his salvation as illustrated throughout the cohesive whole of the entire Scriptures. It provides not only a clear focus on Ezekiel's last nine chapters but guides the reader in understanding the typology and learning to see with the prophetic

eye the major images and themes of salvation history.

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A Companion to The Song of Songs in the History of Spirituality. Edited by Timothy H. Robinson. Brill, 2021. Hardcover. 419 pages. \$239.00.

The Song of Songs eludes consistent interpretation as much as any biblical book. In recent years, many scholars have turned their attention to the Song of Songs as a way of rescuing a view of sexuality in the Christian church. Modern exegetes usually assume that the Song of Songs is primarily a love poem and wonder how responsible theologians historically strayed so far from this interpretation. In *A Companion to the Song of Songs in the History of Spirituality* rather than interrogating the methods of the past and expecting historic theologians to live up to modern standards of exegesis, Timothy Robinson and a handful of well-equipped scholars learn from the theologians of the church. Rather than asking "what is wrong with them?" these scholars ask what "changing spiritual, ecclesial, and political contexts . . . shaped particular authors' or communities' reception of the Song (10)?" Through this perspective the authors provide insights into how theologians have used the Song of Songs throughout the history of the Christian church. *A Companion to the Song of*

Songs in the History of Spirituality is helpful for understanding the history of the Song's interpretation, and guiding one's own interpretation.

The authors intend to investigate the history of interpretation of the Song rather than posit their own interpretation. They accomplish this investigation by examining the underexamined areas of the history of interpretation and challenging the conventional wisdom among scholars. Timothy Robinson helps readers gather their bearings in his introduction, then a different scholar authors each chapter in their own area of expertise. The authors do not intend to give a surface level overview of the history, but in each chapter the scholars responsibly set their topic in the context of scholarly conversation then take a deep dive into whatever their particular interest of study is. This provides the reader with specific examples from which to understand how the Christian church has viewed the Song of Songs.

The book aims to examine figures and themes that are underexamined in modern literature on the history of the Song of Songs. The authors carry forward the themes identified throughout the centuries and then add to these well-examined fields of research in helpful ways. For example, Emily Cain pays special attention to the interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa and how he compares to the interpretation of Origen (18). Hannah Matis shows how the Song helped to form a sense of clerical identity in the early middle-ages

(70). Ann Astell dedicates her entire chapter to the Song in the liturgical preaching of Aelred of Rievaulx (157). Through these articles and others like them one realizes that the Song was always viewed as so much more than an allegorical guide for contemplation, it is a living and active book that gives practical guidance to the church.

Additionally, the author of each chapter gently challenges conventional wisdom about the interpretation of the Song throughout Christian history with well-reasoned and well-supported arguments. Karl Shuve challenges the assumption that Origen had a comprehensive influence on the interpretation of the Song, by presenting evidence of Cyprian's relevance to the understanding of the Song in the Latin-speaking west (43). Rather than accepting the myth that the monks were the only ones who used the Song of Songs, Suzanne LaVere writes how scholastic theologians used the Song as a polemic to get priests and monks to preach in the high Middle Ages (123). Rather than accepting that pietists would have nothing to do with such a book, Timothy Robinson presents a reformed tradition which drew richly from the Song as a part of sacramental piety (327). Finally, in the epilogue, Arthur Holder presents a different narrative of modern exegesis of the Song as a sad departure of most scholars from a rich tradition, while upholding a few modern exegetes who draw from that rich tradition (358).

These articles show that the Song

has had a broad and complex influence on the Christian church. and guide the reader not to wonder if the starting point of interpretation is valid, but whether the end point is beneficial in a certain time or place, or whether modern interpretations of the Song are helpful today.

Through this series of arguments one can easily see the validity of a more allegorical interpretation of the Song. One can see the prominence of Origen's understanding of the text as a wedding song that is primarily about the relationship of Christ and the church and secondarily about the relationship of the soul and the word of God. One can see how many eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century theologians, who have an influential impact even today, have departed from interpreting the Song of Songs in light of Christ. One can draw from these essays both tools and guidance to interpret and use the Song of Songs fruitfully.

A Companion to the Song of Songs in the History of Spirituality presents sound scholarly arguments. Although some familiarity with the history of the Song's interpretation is helpful, it is not necessary. Students of the Bible who are serious about learning this history will gain their bearings soon enough.

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The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture. By Iain Provan. Baylor University, 2017. Hardcover. 712 pages. \$49.95.

The year of 2017 marked a surge of literature relating to the legacy of the Reformation among which this work was presented. In this massive, well-organized volume, Provan argues in an erudite, all-sweeping way what he calls the "seriously literal interpretation" of Scripture (20, 639), namely, a "reformed" (lowercase) approach of reading the Scripture which is "consistent with magisterial Reformation principles and practices" that are "both rooted in pre-Reformation biblical hermeneutics and embraced in post-Reformation, non-Protestant Christianity" (21). The right way of reading the Scripture, which Provan identifies as the "fifth way," is to read the biblical text according to its literal sense given that we properly understand what "literal" means in each biblical instance. Since Provan identifies his approach as the fifth way, there are apparently four other ways of reading the Scripture to which the author consciously reacts. They are historical criticism (the first way), postmodern reading (the second way), the Chicago constituency (the third way), and the counter-Reformational Protestantism (the fourth way).

Having laid out the basic argument, Provan proceeds in a rereading of the history of biblical interpretation in order to justify why the approach he espouses is right. The grand journey through the history of biblical interpretation consists

of three parts: before the Protestants, during the Protestants, and after the Protestants. The first part deals with the patristic and to a lesser extent the medieval exegetical tradition. Provan manages to cover a variety of issues from canonicity, literal meaning, and allegory, to the interpretation of the church fathers, and the validity of Septuagint and Vulgate. What lies at the heart of these ten chapters (chapters 2–11) is a threefold argument: (1) The list of canonical books of the Bible which the Reformers adopted was well-grounded; (2) According to the apostles' way of reading, the Scripture should be interpreted in a literal (but not literalistic) way and as such the church fathers were only partially justified in their appeal to the apostolic authority in their own hermeneutics; (3) The translators of the biblical texts, whether explicitly or implicitly, acknowledged that the validity of the translations were contingent on the authoritative original texts, especially in the case of the Hebrew Bible.

Turning to the second part (chapters 12–16), Provan delves into a detailed and eye-opening analysis of the Reformation idea of perspicuity and authority of Scripture, along with a retelling of the story of the “eclipse of the biblical narrative” starting from the seventeenth century. Again, what Provan purports to do is not a bare report of the past. Instead, the author conveys the history in order to convince us why the fifth way is the right way. Provan first establishes in chapters 12 and

13 a twofold reason the Reformation hermeneutical principles are relevant and prescriptive to the readers of the twenty-first century. First, the magisterial Reformers like Luther and Calvin, in their insistence of *sola scriptura*, engaged themselves critically with the church tradition without diminishing the weight of tradition on one side and dissolving into individualistic chaos in the hermeneutics of the Radical Reformation on the other. Second, for the magisterial Reformers, the authority of Scripture should be understood on the basis of the purpose of the Scripture. Provan cogently highlights the fact that Scripture as God's inspired text is primarily related to its “usefulness” (325, 331). At the same time, the word of God is mediated to us through human beings whose limitation must be considered. In framing these two statements, the author touches upon the doctrine of inerrancy in a very delicate way. What Provan is trying to argue is that Christians should be open, as the Reformers were, to the scientific discovery pertaining to the peripheral details of Scripture that are unrelated to the main purpose of God's word, namely, salvation through Jesus Christ. With this twofold argument in place, Provan then in chapters 14–15 proceeds to a retelling of the story of the “eclipse of the biblical narrative.” The eclipse, for Provan, cannot be simply reduced to the church's failure of battling with the secular naturalism originating in the Enlightenment. Instead, among the seventeenth-century Christians, there existed two reactions to

the newly developed natural philosophy: judiciously engage or belligerently reject. It is the second one, known by Provan as “obscurantism,” that should also be responsible for discrediting the Great Story of the Scripture among the most advanced intellectuals of the time. All the arguments culminate in chapter 16 when Provan offers his critique of the third and fourth ways of reading and presents his case for the fifth way. The first two ways, namely, historical criticism and postmodern reading, are excluded in the discussion since their proponents did not regard an eclipse of the biblical narrative as a problem. The fourth way, namely, the counter-Reformational Protestantism or the retrieval of the Great Tradition reading, is implausible for Provan for several reasons. First, there is no broad consensus of the patristic and medieval theologians. Second, the Platonist-Christian synthesis produced more problems than solutions. Third, the spiritual reading held by the church fathers only obscured the literal sense of the Scripture. Finally, the modern science, which was developed within the modern worldview, did make some appreciative progress. If the failure of the fourth way is its flight from reality, then the failure of the third way is that it picks the wrong fights. The third way, namely, the Chicago constituency, failed to take seriously the contribution of modern science in their reading of Scripture. This stubborn attitude of the obscurants, just as their seventeenth-century predecessors who saw the

natural philosophy as nothing but a threat, can only result in a departure of Christians from “the world of public discourse and into an intellectual black hole from which no light could emerge that might enlighten society in its way ahead” (437).

Despite its nearly two hundred pages, the third and final part of the book (chapters 17–23) is mainly an extension of the last point made by Provan in order to demonstrate the possibility that orthodox Christians should and can faithfully engage with the variety of biblical criticisms evolved since the eighteenth century, such as source and form criticisms, structuralism and poststructuralism, and canonical approach. With dedication and awareness, we are able to absorb the insights brought by the modern critical methods without yielding to their flawed assumptions.

There are many strengths that the readers can identify from this work. First, with such a broad scope of theological and exegetical materials under spotlight, Provan maintains his focus on the single thesis without being distracted or digressing into trivial points. That’s impressive. Second, the retelling of the eclipse of the biblical narrative sheds important light on how one perceives the theological development of the seventeenth century, especially when dealing with the scientific revolution and its impact on biblical studies. Third, Provan’s presentation and evaluation of the modern critical methods in the third

part is extensive, balanced, and useful. One may return to these chapters repeatedly for practical guidance in utilizing any of these methods.

However, Provan's touch on the premodern period is far less promising. Even though the author admits in chapter 16 that there is no such thing as Great Tradition but only great traditions, in the first ten chapters he treats the patristic authors in a fairly monolithic fashion in order to assimilate them to his explanatory scheme. Also, the author's knowledge of Platonism is insubstantial and often misrepresented. The relationship between Platonism and Christianity in the early church was no less complicated than the relationship between Christianity and the natural philosophy of the seventeenth century, a topic which Provan presents fairly well in chapter 14. Few patristic scholars were consulted in this book, let alone medievalists. It is fair to say that the Platonist ontological framework

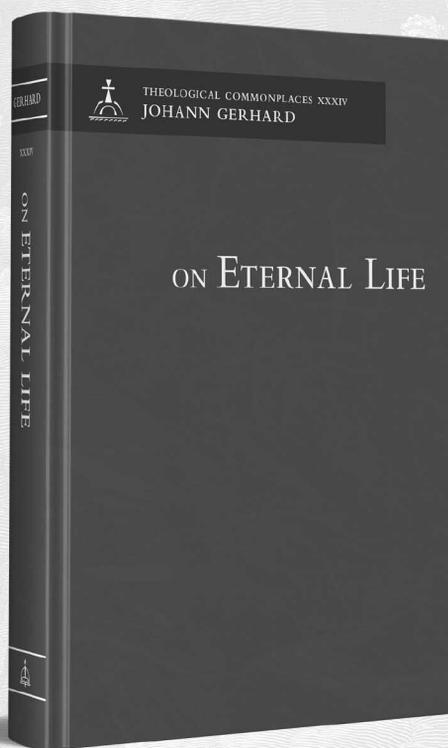
provided some helpful philosophical tools in the formation of a pro-Nicene culture of the third and fourth centuries in which the Nicene Creed was cultivated. What's more problematic is that the only dialogue partner of the fourth way with which the author seriously engages is Hans Boersma. This level of engagement with the premodern tradition can only be a recipe for a shallow understanding of the fourth way. I don't think the author did the fourth way justice in accusing its proponents of being indifferent of biblical languages and critical of the perspicuity of Scripture (19). Despite the fact that the author's portrayal of the hermeneutical development of the premodern period is less successful than his picture of the modern period, for the most part his analysis is remarkable, and the overall argument is compelling.

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New Theological Commonplaces

“Salvation or eternal life is the completion and fulfillment of our faith because ‘now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face’ (1 Cor. 13:12). Now we walk by faith, but then by sight’ (2 Cor. 5:7). In eternal life, sight will succeed faith, and fruition will succeed hope, which is the fulfillment and completion of both.”

— from the Introduction



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