SUMMER 2024 | VOLUME 50 | NUMBER 3

concordia journal

Cover art: Choat, Adobe Stock.

Issued by the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, the *Concordia Journal* is the successor of *Lehre und Wehre* (1855-1929), begun by C. F. W. Walther, a founder of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. *Lehre und Wehre* 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 unde 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).

Books submitted for review should be sent to the editor. Manuscripts submitted for publication should conform to a Chicago Manual of Style. Email submission (cj@csl.edu) as a Word attachment is preferred. Editorial decisions about submissions include peer review. Manuscripts that display Greek or Hebrew text should utilize BibleWorks fonts (www.bibleworks.com/fonts.html).

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.csl.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.

csl.edu | concordiatheology.org

concordia journal

A Concordia Seminary St. Louis Publication

concordia journal
Volume 50 Number 3

Exclusive subscriber digital access via ATLAS to
Concordia Journal & *Concordia Theology Monthly*
http://search.ebscohost.com
User ID: **ATL0102231ps**
Password: **concordia*sub1**
Technical problems?
Email: support@atla.com

All correspondence should be sent to:
CONCORDIA JOURNAL
801 Seminary Place
St. Louis, Missouri 63105
314-505-7117
cj@csl.edu

Editor's Note

The tension of living faithfully in this age is both unchanging and unique. On one hand, this age is no different than what the faithful have faced throughout human history. The tension between this fallen world and the goodness that our Creator has invested in his creation has been present since Genesis 3 and will remain until Christ returns. On the other hand, each generation faces that tension in particular ways. No matter what those particularities may be, we are called to live by hope. The hope of what awaits us at Christ's return is certain and sure. We live in that certainty.

The plenary presentations of the 33rd Annual Theological Symposium help frame how we live by hope in a secular age. Joel Biermann addresses the seemingly perennial tension (perhaps especially among the faithful in America) in our right understanding of how God works in the church and in the governing authorities. In "The Star-Spangled Luther," he directs us to set our hope not upon a utopian theocracy nor to withdraw from the world. Instead, with our certain hope in Christ, engage the world with the Gospel. Michael Zeigler gives attention to the manifold ways in which our neighbors hope for the future. While the Christian hope is unique in both focus and certainty, longing for something better is found among all humans. "Hope Among Rivals" encourages us to listen thoughtfully to the aspirations of others even as we cling to the only hope that is sure—our Lord and his promises. Finally, Joel Okamoto further clarifies our hope by giving attention to our Creator. "Creation and Hope" gives attention to the first article of the Creed so that our hope is not only eschatological (though it is certainly that) but also temporal as God gives us all that we need for this body and life. Such a temporal hope is particularly poignant in this secular age in which God's presence and activity in the world is no longer assumed.

In addition to the symposium plenaries, we are blessed by the insights of Hal Senkbeil. "Lutheran and/or Evangelical?" was delivered at the 12th Annual Pieper Lectures on September 27, 2007. We give thanks to Concordia Historical Institute for permission to print Senkbeil's address here. In the seventeen years that have passed since his address, the insights offered by Senkbeil have not waned in wisdom. This article provides a helpful complement to the symposium theme. Amid the pressures and challenges upon our pastors and congregations in this age, where will we find hope and confidence? In the faith *(fides quae)* handed down to us which remains ever able to create faith *(fides qua)*.

Kevin Golden
Dean of Theological Research and Publications

Encomium for Mark A. Seifrid

What a joy and privilege to be asked to do a laudatory address to this assembly with reference to you, Mark Seifrid! But there is a problem with such an encomium in your case. What should be the focus?

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I could talk about the fact that Mark is a real *mensch*, to use a famous German term—a genuine, good human being. You can sense it in conversation; you can sense it in his home; indeed, you can sense it in any interaction that you have with him and his wife.

I could talk about Mark's honesty. As—or, perhaps, although—the Ernest and Mildred Hogan Professor of New Testament Interpretation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, for many years, Mark embraced and taught the Gospel insights of Martin Luther, openly, and without apology, because he believed them to be true.

I could talk about Mark's integrity. Mark's open embrace of Luther's insights led him to join our LCMS and, indeed, soon afterward, this faculty—to make *public confession* of Evangelical Lutheran understandings of the Sacred Scriptures and of the Christian faith.

I am happy to say that I played some part in this transition, beginning with conversations dating back almost two decades at annual meetings of the international NT society, the SNTS. The 2008 meeting in Lund, Sweden, is still vivid in my mind as a place of the most critical interaction with both Mark and Janice. Integrity is in such short supply these days.

But I am going to talk just a bit about Mark's towering ability to interpret and to expound upon the texts of the greatest Christian intellect—except that of our Lord—in the history of the world, the letters of St. Paul. Unless you have seen Mark function at the pinnacle of NT scholarship in a public setting, as I have been privileged to do, this may very well not be apparent to you, even if you are part of the seminary community.

In fact, Mark offers a rare combination of abilities and interests: a *troika*, as it were:

1. A *deep* acquaintance with and love for the Gospel-centered theology of Martin Luther.

2. A *thorough* acquaintance with and command of Pauline scholarship, especially continental German scholarship.
3. A *solid* acquaintance with and dedication to NT Greek and to literary analysis, which are the bedrock of all textual interpretation.

Listen to Mark's strong theological exegesis of the last part of 2 Corinthians 3:17, in his 2014 Pillar Commentary on this Epistle (176–177), words that are generally translated, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

First, Mark gives a close rendering of the Greek: "Where there is the spirit of the Lord: freedom!" after which he observes: "Paul simply presents and announces . . . Freedom, as a 'hanging nominative.'" Then, Mark goes on to say, "Here, for the only time in the letter, Paul describes salvation as *freedom*, which necessarily finds its definition in opposition to [the human] slavery to condemnation and death . . . Only where the spirit of God is present are we granted this freedom to see ourselves and God rightly, that is, to see ourselves as fallen and condemned and God as our justifier and savior." "Footnote 248: See *Luther's* comments on Ps. 51."

Finally, Mark says, "The freedom of which Paul speaks is not a potential that we must realize by our effort. It is a *liberation* from a heart turned in on itself . . . Freedom is the gift of response to God's goodness, a gift that is unqualified and unconditioned." "Footnote 249: On this theme see *Oswald Beyer, Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics."*

Here is the total package in a very small space: grammar and literary considerations, the insight of Martin Luther, and the insight of scholarship, especially German scholarship. It is like a combination of two of my sainted teachers, Martin Scharlemann and Martin Franzmann, with a heavy dose of Robert Kolb.

Kudos, Mark, on an exemplary Christian life and an exemplary scholarly career—a life and career that we here at Concordia Seminary have been privileged to embrace. May our Lord, the Lord of St. Paul and the Lord of the whole church, bless you and Janice for many years to come.

James Voelz

Concordia Seminary PhD Dissertation Synopses, 2024

Martin Dressler (Advisor: Rev. Dr. Kent Burreson)

The Beautiful Place: Understanding, Perceiving, and Participating in Beauty According to the Doctrine of the Two Kinds of Righteousness. This dissertation examines beauty through the lens of the Lutheran distinction of the Two Kinds of Righteousness, assisting Christians to account for their experience with beauty by attending to the following three questions: (1) What is beauty? (2) How do we perceive beauty? and (3) How do we participate in beauty? This project argues that beauty is essentially fittingness, the creature's conformation to its God-given role, its alignment with God's will. *Coram Deo*, God makes ugly sinners beautiful by giving them the righteousness (beauty) of his Son. *Coram mundo*, God shapes us into the fitting/beautiful creatures he intends through the relationships into which God has placed us (*coram hominibus* and *coram naturae*).

Carl Hanson (Advisor: Rev. Dr. Kent Burreson)

The Contextual Ecclesiology of Ding Guang Xun (Bishop K. H. Ting): The Universal Church as Expressed Through Its Local Identity. This dissertation seeks to understand Ding Guang Xun's view and understanding of the church, especially its universality within and through its particularity. His unique contextual ecclesiology can be a new way for the church to understand its own diversity. The need for the church to constantly articulate its own identity within its unique context is never ending. Each question that the church struggles with in expressing itself is born out of the unique contemporary issues it faces. Thus, the historical, social, and political context of Ding is vital for understanding his unique contribution to this discussion.

Phillip Hooper (Advisor: Rev. Dr. Gerhard Bode)

The American Lutheranism of Georg Sverdrup (1848–1907): An Analysis of His View of the Christian Life in Terms of Conversion, Congregation, and Community. The

Editor's note

These scholars received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Concordia Seminary's commencement exercises on May 17, 2024. Fuller descriptions of their dissertations are available at concordiatheology.org.

dissertation answers the question, "What was Georg Sverdrup's vision or goal for Lutheranism among the Norwegian immigrant population in America, and how was it to be practiced on individual, congregational, and broader levels?" Sverdrup believed the Christian life was to be understood and lived in a congregational setting, which reflects the New Testament model for the congregation. Sverdrup believed Christians acting as individuals and as congregations should interact with each other and the broader community surrounding them in shared ministry and witness.

Timothy Prince (Advisor: Rev. Dr. David Adams)

Typological Reading of the Apocalyptic Vision of Daniel 7 & 9. As a response to Daniel's prayer for the restoration of God's city and sanctuary, "The Seventy Sevens" oracle of Daniel 9:24–27 gives further details of the overarching apocalyptic vision of chapter 7. After establishing how the canonical apocalyptic visions of Daniel and Revelation constitute a unique genre that gives a teleological-eschatological-apocalyptic perspective, this study demonstrates how a typological reading of the text best perceives the revelation and interprets the message presented in Daniel's apocalyptic vision. The "Seventy Sevens" oracle, as the only Old Testament passage to depict two comings of the Messiah, puts greatest emphasis on the time between His comings for the building of God's eternal kingdom-city.

Jared Raebel (Advisor: Rev. Dr. Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.)

The Journey Back to God: A Lutheran Pneumatological Assessment of Postconciliar Catholic Soteriology through the Lens of Pneumatology and Spirit Christology. The dissertation proposes that an adequate way to describe postconciliar Catholic and Lutheran scholars' descriptions of the human person's journey back to God lies in looking at their respective soteriologies through the lens of pneumatology and Spirit Christology. This dissertation proposes the metaphor of the Spirit taking humanity on a journey through the divinely created spaces of the Garden of Eden, the space East of Eden, and the space of the New Eden—where humanity fully experiences the beatific vision. The dissertation also offers a complementary historiographical proposal on how the Spirit of God works through human history to prepare people for encountering Christ, thus becoming known as the Spirit of Christ.

August Trevor Sutton (Advisor: Rev. Dr. Charles Arand)

Put It on The Scales: Bringing Reflective Equilibrium to Digital Ecclesiology. Balancing the polyvalent forces inherent in online worship—or simply answering the question "What should we do with online worship?"—has tremendous exigency for the contemporary church. This dissertation argues that congregations seeking to answer normative questions about online worship must interrogate the relationship between the *bene esse* of the church and the habitual use of technological tools. This dissertation proposes a normative framework for bringing reflective equilibrium to digital ecclesiology.

Articles

The Star-Spangled Luther

Joel D. Biermann

Joel D. Biermann is the Waldemar A. and June Schuette Professor of Systematic Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. A faculty member since 2002, Biermann teaches doctrinal theology with a special interest and emphasis centered on ethics and the correct role of the law in the life of the believer. His most recent book is *Wholly Citizens*.

The last time I addressed a plenary session of a CSL symposium it was 2004. The topic was not one of my choosing, and I wondered then if I might end up getting stuck being associated with that topic going forward. Mercifully, that did not happen and my paper, "Sin, Sex, and Civil Silence" on the local congregation's response to the challenge of homosexuality slipped away into the academic ether and was never heard from again. Now nineteen years later I have again had a topic handed to me—that is, after all, the nature of a symposium. This time, though, it is far too late to wonder whether I might be defined by it. That has already happened; it's why I was picked for a plenary. "Living by Hope in a Secular Age," certainly seems to suggest a consideration in terms of the doctrinal category we call the two kingdoms, or as many of us prefer, the two realms. And, to no one's surprise I do have a few things to say about this topic—even beyond simply keeping the realms straight. And being a realist, I fully expect the impact of this paper to be roughly as enduring as my last plenary paper. Nevertheless, the task has been assigned and the work beckons, so let's get to it.

For some time, I have lamented the widespread misunderstanding and subsequent malpractice that seems to attend most attempts to follow Luther's teaching on the distinction and relationship between the temporal and the spiritual realms. I've read summary dismissals as well as excited endorsements of "Luther's teaching" by non-Lutherans only to discover that they have no idea what Luther

actually taught. But the failure to grasp rightly Luther's insights into God's distinct ways of operating in the world are not limited to those outside the Lutheran orbit. Plenty of Lutherans also misappropriate the teaching resulting in what Robert Benne has called a Lutheran heresy.[1] Strong language, indeed, but I wouldn't disagree. Since I've presented a full treatment of the right way to approach the distinction between the two reams in other places, I'll limit myself here to a succinct, but hopefully sufficient, overview.

Like most of the tensions or distinctions that animate right doctrine, the duality of the two realms is seeking to answer or clarify some question. In this case, the question is, "How does God work to carry out his intentions for his creation?" The answer is that God works in two quite distinct but complementary ways. Ultimately, in both realms his intention is to preserve, prosper, and finally fulfill his creation at the eschatological consummation. Until that last day, he works in a twofold way: in and through the left realm, that is, the realm of mundane temporal life lived out before the world on the one hand; and in and through the right realm, that is the eternal, spiritual realm of creaturely relationship with the Creator on the other hand. Together the two realms capture the whole of created reality, both the coram mundo, before the world, parts along with the coram Deo, before God, parts. This means that the doctrinal category of the two realms is about so much more than merely questions of church and state and their interrelation. The two realms are about all of life. The realm of what Luther liked to call temporal deals with all the stuff of life: work and school, friends and neighbors, crime and punishment, fairness and justice, marriage and family, food and farming, sports and games, beaches and mountains and plains and marshes and deserts and forests, medicine and art, sleeping and celebrating. All the scattered, varied, disparate stuff of this life is included in the coram mundo, temporal realm. The realm Luther dubbed spiritual has one central focus: the relationship between creatures and their Creator. Living as we are in a world fractured and poisoned by our self-inflicted sin, with its sad consequence of death, decay, destruction and damnation, the question of how we and the rest of creation can be right with our Creator is critically and eternally important. As all Christians know and eagerly confess, it is God himself who takes the initiative, sends his Son into the creation to be the Christ, to rescue, reclaim, and restore the creation.

So, the spiritual realm is all about the gospel of free forgiveness and the temporal realm is all about the law that norms and directs our lives together in this world. Both come from God, both matter to God, both are used by God to accomplish his purpose, and both will be brought to glorious completion when the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord returns to reveal his kingdom fully. In the meantime, we live and work and play in both spheres of God's activity. In both spheres or parts or aspects or dimensions of what is ultimately God's one eternal kingdom, God does what he wants to be done through the institutions he has established—to oversee the temporal

realm there is the government or the state, and for the spiritual realm there is the church. And while it is not the focus of this lecture, abiding in both of these realms is the institution of the home or family. Neither the state nor the church is created or evolved from human fear, need, intuition, or cleverness. Both are the idea and action of God himself.

Neither the state nor the church is created or evolved from human fear, need, intuition, or cleverness. Both are the idea and action of God himself.

Responsible and accountable for the work of the government God has placed princes, and responsible and accountable for the work of the church God has placed pastors. Whether or not the office holders know it, both princes and pastors are in a divinely created office. In order that they may accomplish their work, God gives princes the sword and the standard of justice. For their work, pastors have been given the word and the standard of grace. The temporal realm, centered on God's law, is interested in ethics. The spiritual realm, centered on God's gospel, is interested in sacraments and the delivery of grace. The realms are altogether distinct but are not inherently in competition much less paradoxically related. In truth they are perfectly complementary and fitted together for God's purposes of maintaining, reclaiming, and completing his masterwork of creation.

These ideas are not peculiarly Lutheran—that is to say, Luther did not imagine them, craft them, or even discover them. The truths of the two realms are simply the facts about the reality of creation that are at work as ground and guide for the world in which we live. They have always been true for all people in all places whether they know it or not. With his typical insight and grasp of the significance of things and uncanny gift for expression, Luther was able to articulate these truths in a concise and compelling way that provides a tremendous service to the church and the world—even when it is not appreciated. Rather obviously, Luther routinely addressed the particular activities of the church; but he also frequently addressed the tasks of the state as well as the interplay between church and state as each carried out the work it had been assigned. One of his most compact, and I think interesting, treatments of the two realms is found in his exposition of Psalm 82 that he wrote in the spring of 1530. That text finally found its way into publication in 1535. In just under thirty pages of the American Edition, Luther has plenty to say about both pastors and princes—and a good deal of it is wonderfully surprising and even perplexing, at least to our twenty-first-century American ears. The interest and entertainment factor alone makes it worth our attention.

I'll limit myself to a handful of highlights. The psalm itself begins, "God has

taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment" (Ps 82:1). Whether or not his exegesis has merit I'll leave for others to decide, but Luther confidently glosses this verse as a direct reference to the role of pastors in "judging" or holding accountable princes, the "gods" of this world, to heed God's word. He writes:

> So, then, this first verse teaches that to rebuke rulers is not seditious, provided it is done in the way here described: namely, by the office to which God has committed that duty, and through God's Word, spoken publicly, boldly, and honestly. To rebuke rulers in this way is, on the contrary a praiseworthy, noble, and rare virtue, and a particularly great service to God, as the psalm here proves. It would be more seditious if a preacher did not rebuke the sins of the rulers; for then he makes people angry and sullen, strengthens the wickedness of the tyrants, becomes a partaker in it, and bears responsibility for it.[2]

At the very least this blunt directive severely undercuts the standard notion that Luther taught the absolute separation of religion and politics. In fact, he taught the opposite. And, as his commentary makes clear, he rejected outright the idea that a pastor must keep politics out of the pulpit. No doubt, this notion alone is worthy of a lengthy discussion, but there are more surprises waiting to take the stage.

After inspiring and cajoling pastors with their marching orders, Luther turns his attention to the other, complementary realm and finds in the psalm a clear expression of three virtues or guiding tasks that he argues should animate every good prince or civil ruler. They are:

1. "That the gods, that is, the princes and lords, shall honor God's Word above all things and shall further the teaching of it."
2. "To make and administer just laws so that the poor, the wretched, the widows, the orphans are not oppressed, but have their rights and can keep them."
3. "To protect against force and harm and prevent violence, punish the knaves, and wield the sword against the wicked, that peace may be kept in the land."[3]

The last on the list probably sounds about right. Protecting the law-abiding by resisting and punishing evil from within and without is a task most of us are eager for our government to fulfill. For Luther, this task comes in third. Above this responsibility, Luther ranks the virtue of providing what would today be called social justice. Yes, Luther thought it was the government's job to take care of the community's marginalized and maligned. But it is the very first virtue that likely strikes freedom-loving, individual-rights-cherishing westerners as problematic and even unchristian. Luther wants princes to provide all possible support for the church's

work of proclaiming God's truth. As he makes clear in his commentary, this includes active work against heresy which is to be rejected not only by the church but also by the state. Luther is aware of the difficulty of this teaching and spends several pages exploring and clarifying, but his bottom line is clear: when things are working as they should work, false teaching should not be permitted by the government.

The real problem keeping Christians from thinking as they should about the work and purpose of government is about more than just government.

A significant investment of creative text-twisting would be required to find anything in Luther's commentary to support sacred western ideals such as personal autonomy, free speech, religious liberty, or even inherent human rights. For Luther, these are *not* the highest ideals. For Luther what matters, what is the very best thing for all people, is the clear proclamation of, and the living out of, God's law and gospel. As I hope to show, this last point is exceedingly significant on many levels. And as I've already pointed out, this understanding of human flourishing and the proper work of the state in support of that flourishing is not an idea peculiar to Luther, but one utterly consistent with biblical teaching and faithful doctrinal confession.

These are central and consistent teachings of Luther and so of a faithful Christian church. That these teachings so often strike twenty-first-century Lutherans as surprising or even medieval says a great deal about how thoroughly twenty-first-century Lutherans have been shaped by their western, democratic, Enlightenment culture. A task of the faithful church must be to expose the inroads of skewed and even unchristian thinking that lie at the bottom of so much of the routine thinking and taken-for-granted assumptions of her own ostensibly Christian people.

Sometimes what is so obvious that it doesn't need to be said, actually *does* need to be said. This has never been more true than in Christians learning to think rightly about the goals and objectives of good government. The real problem keeping Christians from thinking as they should about the work and purpose of government is about more than just government. Since it is human beings that governments govern, the truth is that no one can come to a right understanding of the work of government without first having arrived at a right understanding of the point of human life. That is to say, if the work of government is related to the flourishing of human beings, then you've first got to know what it means for humans to flourish. This is perhaps the biggest factor behind not only the failure of Christians actually to think and act like Christians when it comes to their political lives, but also the failure of our country's political discourse that is so routinely lamented these days. People cannot actually work together if they are not even certain what it is that they are

working to accomplish. If you don't know where you are heading when you begin and at every step along the way, you can easily end in the wrong place.

I know, this is all rather obvious. But it is not obvious to everybody, and even for those who do know the goal, it seems to be shockingly easy to forget. When a hiker is trying to pick his way across a vast field of boulders, talus, and scree, he needs to keep two things in mind. He needs vigilantly to calculate and judge every single movement and step, *and* he needs to keep the end goal in sight. Finding the way means being careful not to step on an unstable boulder, into a fissure, or onto a heap of broken stone. Picking the right path means stepping, jumping, stretching, and hopping from rock to rock, up and down, back and forth, side to side and forward and back. You've got to keep your head down to do it. And once you get into it, the process is all-consuming. It's like solving a puzzle—and just as entertaining and engrossing. Indeed, the immediate task of picking the right next step can become so consuming that you may well forget to look up once in a while and then the primary task slips away. Far too easily, a person can navigate a brilliant course through a rock field minimizing climbing and handholds and briskly springing from one perch to the next only to reach the end of the field in the wrong place, far from the trail, or worse staring up at a cliff face or down into a surging cataract.

Far more is at stake as the church and individual Christians make their way through life in this world of complex social and political challenges. The historical, social, intellectual, political, and cultural scree and talus and gigantic boulders are littered all around us. Hopping from one earth-shattering crisis to the next, from one life-altering courtroom showdown to the next, from one seismically-consequential-election-of-a-lifetime to the next, from one more critical legislative battle, egregious executive overreach, or predictable governmental failure to the next can become thoroughly engrossing and utterly distracting. The church can become so adept at managing the immediate need that we lose sight entirely of where it is we're headed. Even worse, at those rare times when Christians actually do pause and look up to get their bearings, it may do them no good anyway because they are actually intentionally aiming at a cherished goal that should not even be theirs.

So, what is the goal that *should* be driving those who claim the name of Christ as they pick their way through the intricacies of life in a world that has confidently and gleefully marginalized the church into political, social, and even cultural insignificance? Let's start with what our goal is not. The church's goal is not to beat the world, or the world's governments, or the world's people. Notwithstanding all the rhetoric to the contrary, we Christians are not in a battle with the unbelieving world. We never have been. The world, even an ardently secular world like our own, is not our foe that we seek to conquer. No doubt, man in rebellion against God desires to destroy all that belongs to God; but God's people do not return the favor. Instead, we reject attitudes of antagonism and postures of conflict.

Seeking to live at peace with all men, we have no place for a spirit of denigration and should even give some thought to the propriety of our vocabulary of warfare. Again, this is not to say that the church does not have enemies. It certainly does. There are plenty who hate her. But we have clear direction from our Lord on how we are to handle our enemies, and it does not include competing with, much less beating, them. The only competition appropriate for Christians is the contest to see who can outdo the other in doing good. This truth rules out an air of triumphalism on the part of the church. But a defeatist spirit of resignation and supine cowering in the face of hostility and hatred is also ruled out. Remember, Luther wants the church and her pastors to hold the prince accountable, in all that is done, to God's standards. We do not ever give the state carte blanche to do as it sees fit—not even in purely "secular" matters.

And yet, while we are not out to triumph over the world, neither are we in the business of trying to find a happy fit in the world. That simply cannot happen. While we don't *seek* to live in antagonism to the world, Christians inevitably and invariably do exactly that. We always have. It can't be helped. Jesus did not take aim at Pilate or Herod, but both found him disturbing enough to dispose of him. This is what must happen when someone comes declaring an alternate, eternal kingdom premised on grace that grants a person a new identity with a new way to live and a new set of goals to orient the direction of every plan and choice. Christians do not play the same game with the same rules as the rest of the world. Not only does that make us a problem to the rest of the world, but it means that we cannot ever expect to fit in neatly with the rest of the world or find a comfortable place in the business of the world—at least not the world as it exists all around us in defiance of God and his plans and purposes. Luther knew this well. While he provided clear counsel to rulers in the form of the three princely virtues, he was hardly naive about the chances of a prince actually honoring or practicing any of them:

Notwithstanding all the rhetoric to the contrary, we Christians are not in a battle with the unbelieving world. We never have been.

> These are the virtues they ought to have and practice. But how do things actually go? The very opposite! Among the gods three devilish vices are working against these divine virtues. The world is perverse and perverts all of God's gifts and blessings. This is what it does with these divine offices, too. For it is the princes and lords, who ought to be advancing God's Word, who do the most to suppress, forbid, and persecute it.[4]

Christians should have no illusions about the possibility of finding a comfortable place within a world driven and shaped by fraudulent goals, fruitless purposes, and futile objectives. The world is not our enemy, but neither is it our friend, benefactor, or ally. Of course, if the world and its governments were operating in obedience to God's will, as they *should* be, then they *would* be exactly that: partners in accomplishing God's purposes. But, as we know, a world in rebellion is a world at odds with its Creator. A rebel, broken world and a Christ-following, obedient people can hardly expect to find common ground or a common way of life. We don't share the same understandings, standards, or objectives about much of anything that actually matters. Thus, the church's goal cannot be to cooperate with the world's agenda or to do our part to sustain the world's dreams and ideals. The goals of Christ's church and the fallen world simply are not the same and are almost always, at bottom, at odds with one another.

Faithful Christians do not share the same gods or goals as the world around us, not even a democratic American one.

The sharp, often startling, disparity between the world's way of operating and a faithful Christian way of operating was driven home to me not long ago when I was working on an essay presenting the Lutheran understanding of religious liberty. At first blush it would seem that if ever an American and a Christian could agree it would be on the question of religious liberty. The more I worked, though, the more apparent it became that there is actually very little common ground even in this arena. Americans and their constitution revere religious liberty in order to honor the rights of the individual who must be free to believe what he wants and to worship whatever he wants however he wants. It is his sacred right as a human being, or something like that. Lutherans, on the other hand, don't believe—or perhaps I *should* say shouldn't believe—that we have autonomy to chart our own course, or inherent rights to self-expression, or that we get to choose anything—except sin and death. Furthermore, we Lutheran believers have no real interest at all in lending support to false teachers and idolatry and religious confusion. When it comes to freedom of religion, the best we can do is recognize that in a broken, self-centered, individualism-worshiping, pluralistic world of nation states, it's probably wise for governments simply to keep out of religion—if they can't do it right in support of Christ's church, then it's best that they do nothing at all. Clearly, this is not exactly a glowing endorsement and defense of the notion of religious liberty. I should note in passing that the essay appropriately enjoyed its own less than enthusiastic reception.

That so many Christians seem to embrace with exuberant zeal the notion of

religious liberty as a great and fundamental good for which the church should fight on any and every front only illustrates the remarkable impact that one's culture makes on one's theology. Crafting brilliant academic arguments, forming religious and political coalitions, funding lobbying efforts, and mounting and supporting robust judicial defenses of religious liberty may strike us as exceedingly important, and the victories won may seem worthy of celebration, but such things too easily become a preoccupation that is far worse than merely a distraction from the church's real work. And while the motives driving these efforts may be thought pure and noble, the battle to defend our religious rights is not one that should animate God's people. These efforts amount to picking with great brilliance and creativity the right rock or boulder for the next step then the next and then the next and then, after much investment of thought, effort, resources, and with remarkable cleverness and finesse, successfully finding oneself at last up against a cliff face of unfaithfulness to our Lord or heading down the path of some false god of power, patriotism, rationalism, or Enlightenment individualism. Faithful Christians do not share the same gods or goals as the world around us, not even a democratic American one.

So, if we are not fighting the world or trying to figure out how to get along with, or even just in, the world, what is the church's goal? Not too surprisingly, the church's goal for the world is the same one that the Lord of the church has for the world. Our goal, the goal that should define and drive all that we do is that all of creation is brought to its perfect fulfillment in accordance with God's eternal plan. What we finally want for the world is nothing less than the complete reclamation and salvation of the entire creation. That means, then, that the goal of the church is actually a bit more than merely the faithful declaration of the Word and the right practice of the Sacraments. The means of grace are, after all, *means* toward the end. Getting the gospel declared and delivered is not the end. It is a secondary and penultimate goal; it is not the final telos of it all. Doing word and sacrament is the church's task along the way toward the ultimate goal: the absolute and perfect restoration of the entire creation according to the intention of the Creator. That, and nothing less, is the goal.

Once we see the goal clearly, it is also much easier to see why it is true that Christians are neither enemies nor advocates of the world. We do not seek to triumph over the world, but neither are we interested in supporting the world's futile pursuit of goals that defy God and his will. We seek the consummation of the whole creation living in obedience to the Creator, and not the right of each individual to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Most of the time, we Christians aim far too low and work for things far too trivial. Instead of arguing with the world about the age of the earth or whether the church qualifies as an essential service or how to define a woman or how to practice racial justice or how to combat poverty, we need to keep our eyes on the final goal and act accordingly. Yes, there may well be a place for all the things we tend to think are so very important; but if we are going to engage in them, it must

be for the sake of the world and never for ourselves or for the sake of the church. When we work to hold the world and its princes accountable to God's word, it is for their sake that we do it. Such work must always be understood as second tier at best. And it may well be that some of our most cherished causes will turn out to be simply misguided or even wrong altogether when the pursuit of them blunts and obscures our primary responsibility to witness the truth of Christ to the world around us.

Getting a firm grasp on our true eternal goal should also call into question the very notion of a "common good" that supposedly lies beneath and ahead of all humans and unites them in a mutual task. It is remarkable that so many Christians can speak so glibly about the "common good" as if it is an inherently and universally recognized reality present in the world and readily accessible for all. There can be no common good until there is first a common goal. Knowing the goal makes it possible to then establish the things that are good, that is, the things that confirm, yearn for, and strive to reach the goal. Some vague reference to a supposedly axiomatic principle like the common good is not a sufficient guide or justification for the frenetic boulder-jumping from one critical issue to the next that typifies too many Christians' engagement with the world. What common good can there possibly be between one who follows Christ in the way of self-denying obedience to God's will and one who follows his own ideas and desires on the way to self-fulfillment?

Yes, all human creatures, even fallen ones, certainly do share much in common, but a common grasp of what is the common good is not one of them. And among the many things that all humans do share in common, there are only two that finally matter:

1. We're all sinners who deserve nothing but hell.
2. Jesus died for every single one of us.

How can we not have sympathy and compassion for everyone, including those who make themselves our enemies? But having sympathy and compassion is very different from being co-laborers working together to build a better world. We are not fellow travelers on planet earth who are all doing our best to make sense of life and make the most of the brevity of life while the planet spins randomly through space. We are not all alike in trying to eke out an existence and hoping to find some happiness and meaning. What we absolutely do not have in common with all people is some sentimental nonsense about a universal brotherhood of man all working to use whatever means we can to make sense of life and find whatever glimmers of joy that we can as we preserve our planet for posterity. The common good is not a goal that should occupy the thinking much less the activity of the church. We seek instead *God's eternal good* for the entire creation. So, what *should* the church be doing with the goal of the restoration of all things at the return of Christ firmly before our eyes?

We should be providing the world with a compelling and consistent witness to the truth of Jesus and his gospel. We do this by preaching and practicing the sacraments faithfully, of course; but we also do this by living like Christians: caring for one another in the church, serving the very real needs of those around us, and by speaking God's truth to those who will listen and to those who will not listen. In short, we set our sights on Christ's coming kingdom and live like we actually believe Jesus's promise that he is going to make all things new.

When we get all this straight, it absolutely rules out the absurdity of Christian nationalism. We are not interested in propping up America any more than Ezekiel was interested in propping up Babylon or Paul was interested in propping up Rome. We simply pray and work as we are able for a wise and just prince to rule whatever city or nation in which we happen to find ourselves. Neither do we have any interest whatsoever in creating a Christian state. Only Christ's return will bring the right marriage of the two realms. Until then, we must maintain and honor the distinction and consequent tension. That means that for now, the church's responsibility of witnessing the reality of the gospel to the world will keep us quite engaged with our own work without trying to wield the state's sword. And while the state is absolutely God's temporal realm, it can never be anything more than a stopgap while we all wait for Jesus. The church's job, then is clear: we Christians are to witness to the world the reality of the restoration won by Jesus and remind the state of its job and its obligation to obey God's truth. And for now, that's it.

There is no utopia, no restoration, no Christian nation, no Christian nationalism until Jesus comes and brings everything under his dominion at the eschaton when the temporal realm and the spiritual realm are at last brought into the single reality of Christ's eternal kingdom. That will be on the last day. On *this* day we hope. There is no room for despair. There is no tactical retreat to a new monasticism cut-off from the world. There is no fear and no fighting. There is the unapologetic and unflinching witness to the world of a new reality that is ours right now living in the grace of God given through Jesus by the power of the Spirit. We delight in God's truth, strive to do his good will, and delight in the beauty of his work in this world. We live, in other words, with confident joy. We live with certain hope.

Endnotes

1 Robert Benne, "Perennial Themes and Contemporary Challenges," in Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme, eds. *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 22.

2 *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, American Edition, 56 vols. (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1958–1986), 13:50..

3 Ibid., 57.

4 Ibid., 59.

Hope Among Rivals
Matching Pace—Holding the Promise

Michael Zeigler

Michael Zeigler has served as Speaker of The Lutheran Hour since 2018. Prior to that, he served as a pastor in St Louis. He continues to serve part-time as an Air Force Reserve officer at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, and as a guest instructor for Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis.

I don't usually go barefoot, especially not on hot asphalt in a city park. My kids go shoeless all summer long. I almost never take off my shoes. It's because I have "baby feet," my wife says. That's why I won't go barefoot. But, at the time, it seemed like the better choice because a quarter mile into our walk, my new shoes were wearing blisters on my heels. So, I took them off. My feet were not prepared, however, and I learned that (a) hobbits' feet aren't built in a day and (b) blisters on the soles of your feet are worse than blisters on your heels. And I ended up with both and hobbled around for a week afterward.

I was walking with a friend that day. I'll call him "Craig." I explain to Craig that "these are new shoes, and they're wearing funny, and I can already feel them giving me blisters, so I'm just going to walk barefoot." Craig listened, and then, without comment, did something that struck me as exceedingly Christ-like. Although his Birks fit just fine, he stopped, took them off, and started walking barefoot as well. Craig and I have known each other for almost a decade. And, on and off, for about a decade, we've been talking about Jesus of Nazareth. Craig is a fan of Jesus, but not a follower. But what he did that day—shedding his sandals to match my pace, to feel what I was feeling, to walk with me, was a very Jesus-y-thing to do. Shedding one's shoes to match a hobbling conversation-partner's pace—can be a model for us, talking about how the Church relates to Society today, walking, sometimes side-by-side, in hope.

Hope is a central theme in the story of the *Shawshank Redemption*. The movie

version came out in 1994 based on the 1982 novella *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption* by Stephen King. King didn't think the story would go anywhere, but in the last forty years *Shawshank* has become a global symbol of hope. In 2014, *Vanity Fair* called *Shawshank* the ultimate in "guy cry" cinema. In the *Vanity Fair* interview, twenty years after the movie's release, Morgan Freeman and Tim Robbins said that everywhere they go, all around the world people tell them *Shawshank* is the greatest movie ever, that it changed their life. Robbins said that when he met Nelson Mandela—even he talked about loving *Shawshank*.[1]

I think it is because most people can or want to identify with Robbins' character, Andy, whose journey of hope leads him through twenty years of chipping away at the wall of his prison cell and culminates in a 500-yard crawl through a sewer pipe to a new life in Zihuatanejo, Mexico. The story strikes a chord because most people have a sense that they're going somewhere. "Somewhere" may or may not be a beach in Zihuatanejo. "Going somewhere," may be a journey toward a better "place" emotionally or morally or spiritually—a journey toward inner peace or self-actualization, or simply to be the kind of person who's willing to shed his sandals and walk alongside a friend with blistered feet. However you imagine the goal, it's common to see life as a journey. And we hope that the "somewhere" we're going is better than where we are now, or what we are now.

Making the journey, we're also making a judgment. Some people in our Society hear "judgment" as a bad word, but, if you think about it, we're all acting as judges in some form. Life as a journey wouldn't make sense without judgment—judgment that where you are now or who you are now could be better and should be better. Life is an exercise in judgement, a journey made in hope.

And hope—what is hope? In the novel version of *Shawshank Redemption*, King defined hope as the "excitement" of a person "starting a long journey whose conclusion is uncertain."[2] That's life, isn't it? An exciting, fearful journey, the conclusion of which is still uncertain. Although, as Christians we may take issue with that last word, "uncertain." Some Christians may take issue with it, but we'll talk more about that in a moment. For now, if you do take issue with the idea that the conclusion of your life's journey is still uncertain, then I'd invite you to be like my friend Craig. Even if the sandals of your certainty fit just fine, suspend judgment for a moment, and match pace with someone who might not be so certain about how it will all go, and how it will all end up.

Matching Pace

I'm not saying that people who don't follow Jesus live in constant uncertainty. My friend, Craig, doesn't entrust his life to Jesus, but I wouldn't say that he's riddled with uncertainty about his life. As with many others, I think he would say that so far life has been a mix of confidence and doubt, wandering and returning, sometimes

certain, other times, not so much. And he's tried different ways of walking to cope with this tension. And every way of walking, as we've said, involves a judgment, a decision made about a goal to journey from here to there, to a place you judge to be better than where you are now or who you are now. So, Craig makes a *judgment*, and uses a *strategy*. As far as I can tell, he's tried at least two different strategies. He's tried to form the world to fit with his wishes. And he's tried to reform himself to fit with the world, that is, to reconcile himself to the world as it "really" is.

For example, he started his own business. He made good money, bought a nice house in a place he's always wanted to live, has good friends, started a family. He has been successful at forming the world to fit his wishes. But sometimes he has doubts. During our walk, just as I was starting to feel the blisters burn on the soles of my feet, he told me, "I have everything I ever wanted, or at least what I thought I wanted, but I still feel empty." Like most people, Craig has his doubts. He's not certain that his judgment was a good one. So, he journeys on in hope.

Hope is a perennial human experience. It's like Charlie Brown. Even though he has his doubts, he cannot shake the hope that one day he will kick a field goal. Here, we're talking about hope as a mental state, as philosopher John Searle defined it, hope is a state of mind that includes belief, desire, and uncertainty.[3] Charlie Brown hopes one day to kick a field goal. First, his hope includes his desire for his friend Lucy to hold the football steady for him as he kicks. Second, his hope includes his belief that he lives in a world in which such a feat is possible. Third, since it is yet unattained, there is uncertainty as to whether the hoped-for state of affairs will ever be the case. So, hope, generally understood, is a state of mind that includes belief, desire, and uncertainty. Or to put it in terms more familiar to us, hope has an "already-but-not-yet" quality.

And Charlie Brown has a strategy to bring his hope to fulfillment. It involves speaking words, that is, making speech acts. Speech acts, according to John Searle, can do at least two things.[4] And these two things are reflected in the different strategies people in our Society, like my friend, Craig, use to journey on in hope: they can either form the world to fit their words; or they can form their words to better fit the world. For example, when Charlie Brown says, "Hold it tight"—his speech act succeeds when that state of affairs comes to pass in the world. That's called a **directive**. It's aimed to reform the world to fit the word.[5]

The other option is to reform the word to fit the world. When Charlie Brown looks at his prospects for kicking that field goal and says, "It's no use," he aims to reform his words to

Every way of walking involves a judgment, a decision made about a goal to journey from here to there.

match the world. This is called an **assertive** speech act. Assertions succeed when they accurately describe reality—or, at least, reality as it's declared to be.

Which brings us to a third category of speech acts: **declaratives**. Declaratives are judgments. They simultaneously make the world match the word as the words match the world—the social reality that has just been created. A declarative could be something serious, like a judge's declaration of "guilty" verdict. Or something petty, like in the 1953 origin story behind the football gag between Charlie Brown and Lucy. In the comic, we see Charlie Brown's disgust at the young Lucy's inability to kick a football. Fed up and from a distance, he says to Lucy, "I can't stand it! You're hopeless!" Lucy responds, "Well, after all . . . I'm just a little girl, you know." And Chuck declared, "Little girls don't belong on football fields!"[6] And Lucy, it seems, has been visiting his iniquity upon him ever since.

John Searle's study of language gives us tools for understanding the hope of those around us. Not just peanut-sized speech acts, but the ones that build worlds and evoke hope around which people organize their lives—ultimate, or eschatological hope.[7] Again, we are talking about hope as a mental state, which includes belief and desire while enduring a "not yet." The hopeful walk, and sometimes crawl, forward, carried along in the stories of their lives. They have strategies to see their hopes fulfilled. They make speech acts, declarative, assertive, and directive speech acts. They try to form the world to fit their wishes or else reconcile themselves to an unwieldy reality that refuses to be reformed.

My friend Craig has tried both. By trying to form the world to fit his wishes, he's been a participant in our wider society's story of progress. President John F. Kennedy's "go to the moon" speech of 1962 exemplifies this story. In that speech, Kennedy declared that "man, in his quest for . . . progress, cannot be deterred."[8] In what seems like a blink of an eye, Kennedy observed, humanity had made great strides in technological advancement—steam engines, electrical lights, antibiotics, automobiles, computers, nuclear power, aircraft, spacecraft—progress at break-neck speed. These tangible advancements are like downpayments. They make this hope *proleptic*—meaning that the future is already breaking into the present with signs and testimonies of its coming.

This proleptic hope of progress animates the lives of many in our Society. I was visiting with Joe, my ride share driver whom I had summoned remotely in a moment with the supercomputer I carry in my pocket. Joe, I learned, had a master's degree in physics, and wanted to start a PhD program. "What do you want to study," I ask him. He tells me about LK-99, a new material discovered that could open a new era for humankind, a room-temperature superconductor that, apparently, levitates and conducts electricity with zero resistance, which, according to Joe, my Uber driver, will pull 300 or 400 years of future technological progress into the present—widespread elimination of disease, mind-blowing artificial intelligence, and levitating trains. I'm

not qualified to speak on the physics of LK-99, but I am a witness to how powerfully this hope had taken hold of Joe. He spoke of this future with calm conviction no less certain than our hope for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come.

President Kennedy's progress story is alive and well today. But for all of Kennedy's shoot for-the-moon optimism, he was still a good Roman Catholic. Even in that "go to the moon" speech, he recognized the "not yet" that overshadows all human progress. Maybe we put a man on the moon, but leave the great mass of humanity in the gutter? Maybe we defeat the enemy out there, but are still left with the enemy in here, in our own hearts. Maybe you make it to Zihuatanejo and find that all your problems came with you. At its best, the hope of progress must live in proleptic tension: maybe, or maybe not. Already. But not yet.

When I walked with Craig the day he shed his sandals to match my pace, he was less zealous about progress than Joe the Uber-physicist. He sounded more like Charlie Brown under a goal post after yet another failed field goal attempt: "It's no use." "I have everything I thought I wanted, but still feel empty." Craig has been grappling with the "not yet" that scandalizes the story of Western Progress. And he has been coping with another hopeful strategy, one that is centered on a different class of speech acts. Rather than reforming the world to fit his wishes, he tried reforming his wishes to fit the world. He's aiming to be reconciled to the world as it really is, or, as he'd judged it to be.

A few years ago, Craig took a spiritual retreat to Thailand. He devoted several weeks to living among Buddhist monks. Through the jungle, in a single file line, for eight hours a day, in silent meditation, they would walk, barefoot, in the hope of reconciling themselves to the world as it really is. Put simplistically, that's the goal of Buddhist teaching, to give up our desires to reform the world, to accept that the world is what it is, because when you play the judge, when you try to reform it, you only make yourself more miserable.[9]

Sometimes Westerners look at this Buddhist path and call it hopeless. But, once again, let's try shedding our sandals and matching pace. Try seeing it from their vantage point. It could still be a story of powerful, proleptic hope. But it's a hope, not toward an external goal, but an internal one. It's a path toward inner peace, a journey to accept things as they are, to live in a world without judgment, no good or evil, no heaven and no hell—no God who threatens to judge us.

Consider John Lennon's song, "Imagine," which was made into an illustrated children's book in 2017. "Imagine there's no heaven. It's easy if you try. No hell below us. Above us, only sky. Imagine all the people living for today." With these speech acts, Lennon proleptically offers salvation to everyone—to save us from the fear of God's wrath, to save us from the threat of eternal suffering in hell, to save us from the despair over our failure to make progress. Saved by grace through faith in the assertion, set free from fear, to live fully in the moment, without guilt over the past or

concern for the future. That's what makes it hopeful. It's a journey from illusion into enlightenment.

But, if you call something an "illusion," aren't you still making a judgment? I suppose so. And those who have made this judgment still have their doubts. It's hard to let go of the judgement that some behaviors really are evil. It's hard to let go of the desire to be somewhere better. It's hard to let go of the hope that even though so much in the world has gone wrong, someone, maybe, could put it right. The way of Buddhism, and other paths like it, is difficult. It's not "easy if you try." You might have to walk through the woods for eight hours a day, barefoot. And even then, you'll have your doubts. But that's life. Every path is an exciting, fearful journey we take in hope, the conclusion of which is still uncertain.

Holding the Promise

But what about us, the Church, the followers of Jesus, we're different, aren't we? We have certainty, right? Christians, including Lutherans, are often taught to say, "Yes." We're told that this is what gives our hope the advantage over the competitors. We alone can be *certain*. But, at best, it's a half-truth. It's only half-true because people are referring to at least two different things when they use the word, "certain." Sometimes they're talking about internal certainty. Other times they mean external certainty. Internal certainty means "I am certain." External certainty means "that is certain."

For example, I might say, "I am *certain* my friend will help me unpack my moving truck. He will *certainly* do what he promised." Those statements are about two things: an internal certainty and an external certainty. The *external* certainty focuses on the character of my friend. It says he has a track record of reliable behavior. He's delivered on his promises again and again. He's proven himself. His behavior has a certain quality to it. But that is external, from my vantage point, because it belongs to him, not me. It's on him to show up like he said. The certainty that belongs to me is *internal*, a psychological certainty. It's how I think and feel and speak about my friend. So, here's the question: what do Christians mean when they say their hope is "certain"?

Is it internal certainty? I don't think so if they're being honest. Because every Christian I've ever known has been on a journey with Jesus that has passed through moments of certainty, moments of unflappable confidence, and moments of radical doubt. Maybe not doubts about God's existence—although Christians struggle with that, too—but doubts about God's goodness, God's plan, God's judgment.[10] And it's not just us modern Christians who struggle with doubt. We see this in the great heroes of the faith, recounted in the

What do Christians mean when they say their hope is "certain"?

Bible. Abraham and Moses had their doubts (Gn 17:17, Nm 20:12). John the Baptist, when he was locked up in prison, had his doubts about Jesus (Mt 11:3). Even after Jesus's resurrection from the dead, the great Peter and Paul both expressed their own nagging doubts about God's plan. See Acts chapter 10, verse 14, for Peter's and Romans chapter 9, verse 3, for Paul's. And these are the so-called heroes of the faith. But for most ordinary Christians, the expression of the father of the tormented son, who prayed to Jesus for help, recorded in Mark chapter 9, pretty well sums up the sentiment we all feel at one time or another: "I do believe. Help me in my unbelief" (verse 24). And for those Christians who say they are absolutely certain about the internal certainty of their own faith, 1 Corinthians chapter 10, verse 12, has an appropriate warning for them, "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed, lest he fall."[11]

Engaging with Society in hope, there are two assumptions we ought to avoid.

On this side of Jesus's return for judgment day, the normal Christian experience is a lot like everyone else's: we're on a hopeful path, somewhere between confidence and doubt, wandering and returning, certainty mixed with uncertainty, saved from our sins and fears—already, but not yet. That's how it is. That's how the Bible says it will be for the duration of this mortal life. If you are a follower of Jesus, you don't have to pretend that you have this false internal certainty. You can be honest with others about your doubts. You can be honest with God—he can handle you and your doubts. At some point, we all need to shed the footwear of our false certainty. It doesn't fit, anyhow.

Christians are like everyone else on this journey. The only difference is that we're on the journey with Jesus. He is the difference with Christian hope. It's not in the internal certainty we find in ourselves, in our thoughts or feelings. It's in the external certainty we find in Jesus, in his self-giving death on the cross for our sins, in his resurrection from the dead, in his promise given in baptism and the Lord's Supper to be the Savior and Judge who can bring us and the world to a better place. And because it's external certainty—it belongs to him, not to us. We still have to wait. We have to "go" and then we will "see" (Mk 16:7).

To review, engaging with Society in hope, there are two assumptions we ought to avoid: first that Christian hope is beyond compare, and second, that Christian hope is essentially like everyone else's. If we give into that first assumption—that our hope is beyond compare—we project a false security that keeps us from walking with others. But what if we give in to that second assumption—that our hope is essentially like every other? We lose our Christian identity. We'll lose our opportunity to be witnesses for Jesus in the world. But we don't need to do that. We can take off our shoes and

We can't offer internal, psychological certainty. But neither can anyone else.

match pace with our conversation partners in the world. We can meet them in empathy and walk with them with some solidarity because we also endure a scandalous "not yet" to our hope. But we cannot, we must not surrender the distinctiveness of Christian hope. And we don't need to. Because we know what makes our hope different. It's all in the speech acts. Like others, our hope is grounded on speech acts—not a directive or an assertive speech act, but a **commissive**.

This is a fourth class of speech acts. A commissive speech act is like a directive because it aims to form the world to fit the word. But the difference is that the speaker bears the burden of making the world fit the word. In a directive, or a command, the speaker puts that burden on the hearer: "Lucy, hold the football." But in a commissive, the speaker verbally commits to act for or against another. A promise is a commitment to act for the benefit of the hearer. A threat is a commitment to act against the hearer. A commissive could be something trivial: "Charlie Brown, I promise not to pull the football away." Or something serious: "Unless you repent, you likewise will all perish" (Lk 13:5).

Every year in the fall, our appointed lectionary readings begin to redirect our attention to the final judgment. Soon we'll be getting to hear those uncomfortable parables of Jesus: the story about the young women who run out of oil in their lamps and get shut out of the wedding feast; the one about the servant who didn't manage his talents well, and gets cut off, forever; the one about the shepherd who separates his sheep from the goats. All of these, Jesus says, are pictures of the final judgment—God's final decision to separate the faithful from the wicked, the saved and the condemned, the sheep from the goats (Mt 25). We can't talk about Christian hope without this part, too. It is this double conclusion to the journey—the promise of salvation and the threat of damnation still before each of us—that puts every Christian in the same internal tension as everyone else—between certainty and uncertainty. But it's our strategy in dealing with the tension that's different. We don't seek certainty by trying to reform the world to fit our wishes. And we don't seek certainty by trying to reform ourselves. We don't look for certainty inside ourselves, but outside of us, *extra* nos. We seek certainty in a person, in Jesus, God's Son, our Judge, our Savior. That means we take his warnings seriously. And we hold to his promise, desperately.

In his novella *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*, Stephen King narratively defines hope as the excitement of a man starting a long journey whose conclusion is uncertain. King continues, in the voice of one of his characters: "How many nights must Andy have lain awake . . . thinking about that sewer line, knowing

that one chance was all he'd ever get? The blueprints might have told him how big the pipe's bore was, but a blueprint couldn't tell him what it would be like inside that pipe—what he'd find at the end of the pipe, when . . . he got there."[12]

The Christian hope is not based on a static, doctrinal blueprint. It's not a doctrinal problem we can solve once and for all and be done with it. Nor is it a plan of action to make the world fit our wishes. We have doctrines and directives to show us the way and keep us on track, but in the end, inside the pipe, we have promises and threats before us. I tell my friend, Craig, about Jesus because I want him to be saved from the threat of hell. And I keep crawling back to Jesus because the same threat is still before me, and each of you. We each have a terrifying power to destroy ourselves, eternally. And God in his hiddenness, as Luther said to Erasmus, God hardens one and converts another, condemns one and saves another.[13]

It is a hallmark of Lutheran theology to not to try and solve this scandal, neither with more accurate assertions nor with more effective directives. Our certainty is not something we possess inside us, psychologically. Our hope isn't an isolated state of mind. It is relational, based on a promise that we need to hear again and again, fleeing from God hidden, to God given in Jesus, who weeps, wails, and groans "over the [condemnation] of the ungodly," who "has been sent into the world for the very purpose of willing, speaking, doing, suffering, and offering to all men everything necessary for salvation."[14]

Hope in Jesus doesn't offer an escape hatch or an easier route. He leads us through all the same *skandalon* and *skubalon*. But, in the end, he promises to give us himself, and with him, everything else thrown in, Zihuatanejo included.

As the Church, we can't offer Society an easier path. We can't offer a way free from doubt. We can't offer internal, psychological certainty. But neither can anyone else. All we can promise is the faithfulness of the Son of God, who suffered and died, rose, reigns, and will return to save us. We can promise because Jesus promises, not just to shed his sandals to match our pace, but also his outer garment to wash our blistered feet (Jn 13:8). And he walks with us. He calls us into community. And he calls us to walk with others, to match pace with them, to withhold judgment, to witness in hope, and maybe even to learn from the way they walk.

The week before that walk in the park with my non-Christian friend, Craig, my family and I were walking that same path one evening. And my wife, Amy, was complaining about her footwear. The straps of her sandals were rubbing on her feet weird and causing her pain. So, she took them off and walked barefoot. And for the rest of the walk, I was annoyed, because she was walking so slowly. At the time, I didn't even think to take off my shoes and walk barefoot with her. I mean, who does that?

Endnotes

1 Margaret Heidenry, "The Little-Known Story of How *The Shawshank Redemption* Become One of the Most Beloved Films of All Time," *Vanity Fair* (2014), accessed on Sept 1, 2023, at https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/09/shawshank-redemption-anniversary-story

2 Stephen King, *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption* in *Different Seasons* (New York: Viking, 1982), 101.

3 John Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (New York: Cambridge, 1983), 35.

4 John Searle, *Mind, Language, and Society: Philosophy in the Real World* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 100–104.

5 Ibid., 146–152. Searle describes five kinds of speech acts: (1) *assertives* (word-to-world direction of fit; (2) *directives* (world-to-word direction of fit); (3) *commissives* (world-to-word direction of fit with the responsibility of "fit" assumed by the speaker, e.g., promises and threats); (4) *expressives* (null direction of fit, but assumes a word-to-world direction of fit); and (5) *declaratives* (dual direction of fit).

6 Charles Schulz, *Peanuts Every Sunday Vol. 1: 1952–1955,* 107.

7 Michael Zeigler, *Christian Hope Among Rivals: How Life-Organizing Stories Anticipate the End of Evil* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017).

8 President John F. Kennedy, "Why go to the Moon?" speech delivered at Rice University, Sept 12, 1962, accessed on May 15, 2024, at https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/address-at-rice-university-on-the-nations-space-effort.

9 Jan Nattier, "Buddhist Eschatology," *Oxford Handbook of Eschatology,* ed. Jerry Walls (New York: Oxford, 2008).

10 Cf., Gregory Boyd, *Benefit of the Doubt: Breaking the Idol of Certainty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).

11 An astute student of Scripture brought to my attention Luke 1:4, i.e., Luke's desire that Theophilus "may have certainty" concerning the things he has been taught. I concede that this must in some sense be "internal" or psychological certainty for Theophilus (or any reader of Luke's Gospel). However, this is properly seen as a *goal* of Christian sanctification that has not yet been reached, otherwise we could put aside the Gospel and no longer hear or read it. But this would be unwise, as Luther said, "As long as we remain in this vile life, where we are attacked, hunted, and harried on all sides, we are constrained to cry out and pray every hour that God may not allow us to become faint and weary and fall back into sin, shame, and unbelief . . . We cannot help but suffer attacks . . . but we pray here that we may not fall into them and be drowned by them" (Luther's Large Catechism, Lord's Prayer, Sixth Petition).

12 King, *Shawshank* in *Different Seasons*, 92.

13 Martin Luther, "The Bondage of the Will," in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, eds. Rupp and Watson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1969), 138.

14 Ibid., 206.

Creation and Hope
How the First Article Teaches Us How to Live by Hope

Joel P. Okamoto

Joel P. Okamoto occupies the Waldemar and Mary Griesbach Chair in Systematic Theology at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, Missouri. Among his research interests are the concept of truth for Christian life and witness, a contemporary account of the theology of Luther and Lutheranism, and an account of systematic theology for our post-Christian times.

Living by Hope and the First Article

Christians have wonderful promises to give them hope. The promises are wonderful both because of what is promised—eternal life and salvation—and because of the one making the promises—God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. The fact that God is making the promises means that Christians living by hope will be confident to find God working out good things in the world that is his. Christians will have hope in God for life in this age, and not only for the life of the age to come. Christian faith means temporal hopes along with eschatological hopes.

It is rather uncommon to explore the temporal hopes implied by God being the Creator. But the First Article of the Creed invites us to do this, and the way the Lutheran Catechisms confess God the Creator gives us concrete guidance. One reason for staying with the Catechisms is because they are familiar and accessible. Another reason is because they are "good theology." There is a difference between saying of someone "He knows a lot of theology" and saying of someone else "She has good theology." By "good theology" I mean theology that helps you to make good sense of situations, questions, problems, or opportunities in ways that are faithful, useful, and effective. If theology is an answer, then good theology is an answer that helps you to do a lot. Good theology does not only reflect knowledge but imparts wisdom. The Catechisms certainly do this.[1]

Since this undertaking is rather uncommon, it may help to explain why I am

But we would go too far to suspect that in our daily walk, we may meet the devil or death or danger.

doing this. Two sayings will help. One comes from philosopher Iris Murdoch. She once wrote: "It is always a significant question to ask about any philosopher: what is he afraid of?"[2] This advice applies to all people who are reflecting on questions and problems. They are thinking, talking, and writing because they have a concern or are facing a challenge. But the concern or challenge may not be evident, and so asking "What is he afraid of?" is always significant.

The other saying comes from psychologist and philosopher William James. It is about truth: "The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief."[3] When we emphasize that something is "true," we are usually doing more than merely calling attention to the fact that something happens to be the case. For example, if we speak of the Nicene Creed as "the truth of the Scriptures," we are not calling attention to everything the Bible claims. We are holding that the Nicene Creed is what is "good in the way of belief" when it comes to the Scriptures.

Discerning that sin and evil are in the world is one thing. Expecting the world to be sin and evil is quite another, and out of line with the confession that "God has made me." "Expecting the world to be sin and evil" is what I am afraid of, along with the fear, suspicion, anger, resentment, and despair that come with such expectations. We should recognize that there are sin and evil in the world, that we meet with death, destruction, and oppression. But we would go too far to suspect that in our daily walk, around any corner, we may meet the devil or death or danger, or to lead our lives fearful that the world is out to get us. But this is happening more and more, and it happens because of a loss of hope. This is what I am afraid of.

The First Article of the Creed, the confession of faith in God as the maker of heaven and earth, is what is good in the way of belief. Christian thoughts about living by hope usually run through the Second and Third Articles. They are based on Jesus Christ as the one who will return in glory to judge the living and the dead and whose kingdom will have no end. They are directed toward the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come.

But the First Article also teaches us about living by hope, especially regarding things that matter right now for our lives. The eschatological hopes of Christ's return, the resurrection of the dead, and the life to come are *constitutive* of being Christian. These hopes are essential to a Christian's make-up. Without these hopes, you are not a Christian. But confessing God as the Creator, as the one who "made me," means that we trust God as the one who gives us everything we need to support ourselves in this life and who is protecting us from harm and evil in this age. More than this,

by praying, "Give us this day our daily bread," we are expressing hope. The Fourth Petition is nothing other than praying for God to be the Creator. We pray this way because we already know that God gives daily bread even without our prayer, and even to those who are wicked. This is part of God's goodness as the Creator. The prayer itself expresses hope for things that matter right now.

To be sure, God's provision happens unevenly. We are led to ask, "What are you doing God?" or "God remember me." Sometimes there is much trouble, suffering, loss, and evil in our lives. What Jesus said would precede the destruction of the temple happens year after year: wars and rumors of wars; nations rise against nations; famines and earthquakes; and all the rest. Nevertheless, God is still at work being a gracious and merciful God, doing good things and protecting from danger and evil to fulfill many temporal hopes. Moreover, God is accomplishing much of this for us and all people through our fellow human creatures.

So, the First Article is valuable for developing the theme of this symposium, "Church and Society: Living by Hope in a Secular Age." The Lutheran Catechisms on the First Article on God as creator, along with the Fourth Petition about daily bread and the First Commandment, are good in helping us to see this and to live by hope. They show us the good in the way of our belief in God the Father Almighty.

"A secular age" (our latest development)

What do we mean by "a secular age"? "Secular" and its cognates like "secularity" are terms used in several ways.[4] This is still the case when we limit its use to speaking about situations where religion is no longer unquestioned.

Sometimes "secular" is used to refer to a situation when "public spaces" like civil politics or public education have been cleared of God and religion. This is what the French aspire to in their public lives, a freedom *from* religion. Recently the French education minister banned middle and high school students from wearing the *abaya*, a long tunic worn by many Muslim women. "School is free. It's for everyone, and it's secular. And I don't want schools where we can identify the religion of students by looking at them or where there's pressure on certain students to wear religious attire."[5] At other times "secular" refers to a situation where actual religious belief and practice have fallen off. France is secular in this way, too, as are England and Germany (regular church attendance is 10 percent or fewer). But there is a third way to use "secular," and that is to refer to the social conditions for religious belief. "Secular" in this case refers to the developments and changes that make the other two senses of secular possible.

A shift to secularity in this sense means moving from a situation where belief is unchallenged to one where religious belief is one option among several. This is what Charles Taylor means in his influential and much-discussed book *A Secular Age*. As he explains:

> The change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others. I may find it inconceivable that I would abandon my faith, but there are others, including possibly some very close to me, whose way of living I cannot in all honesty just dismiss as depraved, or blind, or unworthy, who have no faith (at least not in God, or the transcendent). Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives.[6]

"Secular" in this sense describes an entire society, and it applies to everyone in the situation. It does not apply only to conditions where religious belief and practice are marginalized and even repressed. It does not apply only to those for whom religious belief and practice are unimportant or problematic. It refers to everyone in the situation. In this sense, all of us are secularized; all of us are secularists.

This is more than mere wordplay, a clever way of applying a label. It makes sense of various related experiences. The shift to a secular age is challenging for many people. For example, many Christians experience something like this:

> And this will also likely mean that at least in certain milieux, it may be hard to sustain one's faith. There will be people who feel bound to give it up, even though they mourn its loss. This has been a recognizable experience in our societies, at least since the mid-nineteenth century.[7]

The shift to a secular age is challenging for many people—and not only Christians. This is *social* shift, a widespread change in shared assumptions about the "way things are" and about "what we can expect." Accordingly, many feel a sense of *loss*. With this sense of loss, *hope* often fades. Instead, fear, suspicion, confusion, resentment, and anger grow.

Fear, suspicion, confusion, resentment, and anger reflect all too often how Christians in the United States face the secular age. This is worth considering. Thomas Long, the well-known preacher and homiletician, pointed this out almost thirty years ago in a lecture here at Concordia Seminary. He referred to the "wicked servant" in Matthew 24, the one who said to himself, "My master has been gone a long time." What does he do? He doesn't put down his broom and take a nap. No, he gets mean and coarse and violent. He begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards. This is what can happen when Christians lose their hope.[8] The meanness and coarseness and violence that are increasingly associated with some (and only some) Christians in America look like "wicked servants" who have lost their hope.

Faith, Hope, and the First Article

The shift to a secular age is challenging for many people—and not only Christians.

The First Article of the Creed helps us to understand how God figures into fulfilling temporal hopes, including what might be called "social hopes," that is, the temporal hopes shared by believers and unbelievers alike. The Lutheran Catechisms are particularly helpful guiding us for two reasons. The first is that they are basic and widely familiar already. Among Lutherans, there is no need to argue for their importance. The second is that they focus on the individual believer. As the explanation of the First Article puts it, "I believe that God has made me . . ."[9] The Catechisms are existential and personal, not cosmic. For a conversation about living in society, this is the desired perspective.

The First Article confesses: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." This article teaches us that God is the Creator and that we are creatures. This teaching has at least three kinds of implications for discussing living by hope for church and society: anthropological (what it means to be human); social (what it means to live with others); relational (how God and human creatures relate to each other).

Anthropological

The First Article teaches us that human beings will live by faith and will live by hope. These are basic features to being human.

The fact that human beings are creatures implies they will live by faith and live by hope. They will live this way by virtue of being creatures. Why? Because they are products of sheer grace and mercy. Robert Kolb illustrates this by asking: Do you remember, about nine months before you were born, the conversation your parents had with you? The one where they said they would have you if you agreed to be good and cooperative? No, of course not. That's impossible. This in turn reflects that your very being and your life are purely gratuitous. Everything, from the beginning, is in the same position. Everything that exists does so "purely out of fatherly divine goodness and mercy." It is all by grace. God alone is free. Creation is always dependent on God—by definition. This is certainly the case with human beings.

Therefore, they must depend on something outside themselves—living by faith. And they must live prospectively, looking for something good to come—living by hope. The terms faith and hope are closely related in common usage. In Romans, Paul says that being justified by faith brings not only peace with God but "the hope of the glory of God" (5:1–2 NIV). The Letter to the Hebrews says, "Faith is being

sure of what we hope for" (11:1 NIV). Distinguishing them is not straightforward, so for the sake of this discussion, I will define faith as "looking toward someone or something, depending upon him or it," and hope as "looking toward a future good on the basis of this faith." "I believe in God the Father Almighty," and for this reason I look for him to take care of me and answer my prayers—that is, I have hope. This understanding is reflected in the Small Catechism's explanation to "Our Father who art in heaven": "God would by these words tenderly invite us to believe that he is our true Father and we are his true children, so that we may with all boldness and confidence as him as dear children ask their dear father." We believe in God as our heavenly Father, and we therefore express our hopes and his fulfilling of them in the future by praying to him, including "Give us this day our daily bread."

The point here is that living by faith and living by hope are essential to being human. They are features of being creatures. As *creatures*, we must depend on something outside of ourselves—we live by faith. We are limited, finite, even at our best. The world and our lives in it are never really in our control. We simply *will* live by faith.

Furthermore, as creatures we are bounded in time. We can't change the past. We can only imperfectly and unreliably and certainly in only limited ways determine our futures. We simply will live by hope.

Notice that I have said, "We will." Faith and hope are not options. They go with being creatures. All human creatures are creatures, and this means that they are made to look to something or someone outside themselves. They are made to live by faith. The Large Catechism makes this plain when it discusses what a god is under the First Commandment. "As I have often said," Luther writes, "it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol. . . . For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God."[10] A god is whatever you depend upon for all that is good and for protection from harm and danger. Of course, because of sin, faith and hope are often misplaced. They are directed, for example, toward money.

Social

The First Article teaches us that human beings will depend on each other and look for good from others.

Human beings will put their trust in and pin their hopes on others because they are creatures who will depend on others, and because God works through human creatures to do good and protect from danger and evil. This is what parents do: they are the "others" that their children put their trust in and in whom the children have hopes. This is what pastors do for their congregations, what teachers do for their students, what neighbors do for each other. It is also this way with our economies and our governments. We rely on them and organize ourselves around them. And

this is not only because we are creatures, but because God works through these others to provide for them. So, the First Article has something basic to say about how we conceive of societies.

Relational

The First Article teaches us about how God relates to human creatures, and how human creatures relate to one another. In this area, too, I have learned much from Robert Kolb. He pointed out:

> Relationship offers a good vantage point from which to assess how God, his human creatures, and indeed his whole creation actually function and therefore what the foundation or structure of reality is. . . . The relationship between God and his human creatures is not only, but most importantly, a matter of conversation.[11]

In the garden of Eden, God conversed with Adam and Eve, and after they had sinned, he came looking to have a conversation with them. God continues to speak. God's definitive and complete revelation of himself is called his Word. God worked creation through his *Word*, and God relates to human creatures by conversing with them. Human creatures, who count on others, also relate to each other by conversation.

Conversation is how human creatures relate both to God and to each other. It is through conversation that one is treated as a human being, not as a pack animal, a machine, or an obstacle. It is through conversation that there are cooperation, decisions, warnings, promises, repentance, and forgiveness. Conversation establishes relationships, sustains them, changes them, and sometimes ends them.

Conversation in this broad sense, which includes not only speaking and listening but also writing and reading, is almost infinitely varied. But there are two forms of communicating, that is, two kinds of conversation, that matter especially to our purposes. They are telling someone how things really are, or telling the truth, and telling someone how things will be, or making promises. Without knowing how things really are, and without assurances about how things will be, there can be no faith and no hope.

God does both of these things. He tells us how things are (truth), and he tells us how things will be (promises). Human creatures live by faith and by hope because God tells the truth and because God keeps his promises. Moreover, human creatures, who count on others, also look to others for the truth and for them to make

Conversation establishes relationships, sustains them, changes them, and sometimes ends them.

and keep promises. In these ways they put their trust in and pin their hopes on fellow human creatures.

The First Article and Living by Hope

Contemporary theology has stressed that eschatology is both "now" and "not yet." This means recognizing both that the new age has already been inaugurated in the first coming of Jesus Christ, and so *now we* live in the end times, and also looking forward to the final consummation when he comes again in glory, which is *not yet*.

What I have been doing might be understood as a play on the "now" and "not yet" of eschatology. Despite the efforts of systematic theology, the living eschatology in the church's preaching, teaching, worship, and spiritual care often highlights the "not yet" of Christ's return in glory, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life in the new creation. Living by hope in these terms looks like contentment with our lives and confidence in the face of evil and death, because "One day, things will be great."

But this accent on "not yet" can tend to cast the "now" as bad, evil, dark. This is especially true in our "secular age." The First Article reminds us that "now" is when God the Creator is at work doing good and protecting from danger and evil. Knowing and believing in the God and Father of Jesus Christ as *our* Father implies that we recognize and embrace his work here and now. Here are some implications:

- The First Article tempers fear, suspicion, resentment, and anger about "society," "the world," those with whom you disagree, and people who aren't like you. The First Article reminds us not only that they are fellow creatures whom you are to love, but also that God the Creator is being your God and Father through them. None of this excuses sin and evil on anyone's part. But there is much more than sin and evil going on and coming our way, and we should receive it and the ones doing it with thanksgiving.
- The First Article shows how we can expect and work for a common life together. "I believe God has made me *together* with all creatures . . ." The concepts of estates, stations, offices, orders, and vocations as Luther developed them, along with the distinctions between two realms and two kinds of righteousness, are entirely relevant.[12] All human beings have offices through which God is at work, and to a considerable extent, life goes on through them without anyone paying much attention to how they are part of God's economy. But when things start to break down, or there are new challenges or opportunities, the First Article and the theological concepts and distinctions that flow from it can help Christians to participate faithfully and generously.
- The First Article implies not only that we will relate to fellow human creatures through conversation, but that we would hope to learn from them about leading our common life together, and that they might learn from us.

But Christians in this secular age are sometimes suspicious of non-Christian views, theories, and proposals, along with the people offering them. They can even be suspicious of Christians who do not appear to be aligned with them theologically, ecumenically, liturgically, or politically. Discernment is always important, but discernment rather than a policy of avoidance is necessary.

A concrete example of Christians expecting to learn from others is in the "Practical Theological Framework" that has been adopted at Concordia Seminary. This framework has four aspects or pillars for dealing with questions, challenges, and opportunities in our lives. One of them is "Engaging First Article Wisdom." This involves learning from non-theological studies and disciplines to understand our situation more clearly or fully. As the label makes explicit, this appreciates that God is the Creator and doing good things through his human creatures, and it calls on theologians to act in hope by seeking to learn from others.

I have taken on a very broad assignment, and a convenient way to step away from it is with two more illustrations. They are modest, every day, "you can do this, too" kinds of illustrations.

The first illustration is a personal one about acquiring First Article wisdom. As a seminary student I learned, or at least acquired, a deep suspicion of church marketing. I had read things like *The Intrusive Word* by William Willimon and "Selling [Out] the Church in the Marketplace of Desire" by Philip Kenneson. They convinced me that marketing and the ministry of the church were polar opposites.[13] But nearly thirty years later, I read and re-read David Ogilvy's book, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*.[14] I didn't realize how much it mattered to me until my wife said something about it. Her mother was visiting, and the book was on a table in the living room. She asked about it, and I started to tell her. From another room, my wife said, "It's one of his favorites." This thought had not occurred to me before, so I thought a while about her remark. I realized that Ogilvy had changed my mind about marketing and the ministry of the Church. In the language of this article, he had made me less suspicious and more hopeful about marketing. Of course, marketing ideas and goals can deceive us, and so we must be discerning. But the possibility that advertising will be misused does not mean advertising always will be misused. The distinction needs to be recognized and the value of advertising appreciated. Here are two things that Ogilvy made me appreciate, related to what I pointed out before about God and conversation:

- *Telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.* Perhaps Ogilvy's most well-known line is this: "The consumer is not a moron. She is your wife. You insult her intelligence if you assume that a mere slogan and a few vapid adjectives will persuade her to buy anything. She wants all the information

you can give her."[15] What applies to your spouses, your children and siblings, your in-laws, neighbors, and co-workers, applies also to the hearers, Bible study participants, and small-group members in your congregations. They are not stupid, and while most of them are wonderfully forgiving, do not take them granted. Whenever you claim something to be true, be ready to explain it fully, clearly, and concretely.

- *The significance of promise.* "Your most important job," Ogilvy wrote, "is to decide what you are going to say about your product, what benefit you are going to promise. Two hundred years ago Dr. Johnson said, 'Promise, large promise is the soul of an advertisement' . . . The selection of the right promise is so vitally important that you should never rely on *guesswork* to decide it."[16] Promise is essential to gospel; what doesn't convey an eternal divine promise to hearers isn't truly the gospel. Ogilvy's instruction applies as much to preachers as to account executives.

The second illustration goes back to the ideas that being creatures means that we have been made for faith and hope, and that God provides for us through each other. Because of these things, we should expect both generosity from our neighbors and their gratitude for the generosity of others. Once again, sinfulness means that these expectations will not always be fulfilled. But these expectations are based on faith in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and God is greater than sinfulness.

But we should expect no less of ourselves. We should be what God made us to be: those who live by faith and live by hope, which means, among other things, being generous and showing gratitude.

So, the illustration is praying for strangers. Recently a student told me about approaching a stranger each day and asking if he could pray for them. To his surprise and delight, most of them said "Yes," and no one was harsh or dismissive about his request. He was generous as well as faithful, and others were grateful in return.

But perhaps we should not be so surprised. After all, all of us have been made to look to someone. Prayer reflects faith and hope in quite a specific way, but living by hope is what all of us do, even in a secular age.

Endnotes

1 For this article, I have also benefited from the good theology of Robert Kolb and Charles Arand about the Catechisms and about Luther's theology.

2 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2001), 71.

3 William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking, in Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1978), 42.

4 See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 1–3.

5 Eleanor Beardsley, "A ban on wearing the abaya in French schools is causing an uproar," NPR.org, 8 September 2023. https://www.npr.org/2023/09/08/1198520450/a-ban-on-wearing-the-abaya-in-french-schools-is-causing-an-uproar. See also Elaine Ganley, "France's education minister bans long robes in classrooms. They're worn mainly by Muslims," AP News, 28 August 2023. https://apnews.com/article/france-education-robes-muslim-secular-56ea1c6c458bd9c46a4bf26ceeda73a9.

6 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

7 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

8 Thomas G. Long, "The Life to Come: Preaching with Hope," *Concordia Journal* 22 (1996): 358.

9 This and other quotations of the Small Catechism are from *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943).

10 Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 386.

11 Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 5. See also Robert Kolb and Charles Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), especially Part 2.

12 For more on these matters, see Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957). Wingren's study is particularly helpful for this discussion because develops these matters in terms of creation.

13 William H. Willimon, *The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 18–22. Philip D. Kenneson, "Selling [Out] the Church in the Marketplace of Desire," *Modern Theology* 9 (1993): 319–348.

14 David Ogilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man* (New York: Atheneum, 1963).

15 Ogilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, 96.

16 Ogilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, 93.

Lutheran and/or Evangelical? The Impact of Evangelicalism on LCMS Pastors

Harold L Senkbeil

Harold L. Senkbeil is Executive Director Emeritus of DOXOLOGY: The Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care and Counsel. He served as a parish pastor for thirty-one years and on the faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne as Associate Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions. He is the author of *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart*.

There's no question that the last thirty-four years have been significant for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Emerging from its long and contentious agony over the nature of the Bible and its authority which emerged in the middle of the last century and came to a head in the '60s and '70s, the Synod deliberately focused its attention increasingly over the last three decades toward the mission of the gospel. While none of us have a quarrel with that focus, it ought to go without saying that the evangelistic mission of the church must be carried out in the context of her evangelical ministry—that is, the myriad of efforts mounted to get the gospel out must never conflict with getting the gospel straight.

If you know your Bible, you understand that this is nothing new. The apostle Paul urged young Timothy to "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tm 4:3). Yet in the same breath he also reminds Timothy that this vigorous outreach doesn't take place in a vacuum: "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions" (4:4). It seems that it is always a challenge to get people to hear one thing when their ears are itching to hear something else. Therefore, the apostle urges both faithfulness and zeal on this young preacher: "As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry" (4:5).

These twin responsibilities of the church and her ministers, that is, both

faithfulness and zeal, have frequently if not perpetually been in competition during the church's history. The desire to keep the message straight has on occasion gotten in the way of getting the message out. But more frequently, and especially in our own generation, zeal for getting the message out seemingly trumps the need for faithfulness in keeping the message straight.

In the time I have on the conference program, I want to explore with you some of the issues involved in maintaining our equilibrium in upholding both evangelistic zeal and doctrinal faithfulness in our time. Truth be told, sometimes we who are serious about the church's doctrine sound as though we were merely archivists of the past rather than preachers and teachers of an unchanging truth to this changing world. We come across as though we were simply nostalgic for days gone by. But obviously we cannot turn the clock back. This is not the first century nor the sixteenth century nor the 1930s. We live in the twenty-first century, and we have come to the kingdom for such a time as this. Therefore, it is our responsibility to hold forth the faith as it has always been believed, taught, and confessed among us recognizing full well that the world around us is in continual flux.

So far, I think I have said nothing controversial. But as I move closer to the heart of my assignment, the task gets a bit more complex. What I'm really addressing in this paper is an issue close to the heart of our confession: what does it mean to be Lutheran in our time? How can we be genuinely zealous when it comes to mission and yet remain faithful in our doctrine? What does it mean to be evangelical Lutherans in an evangelical world? Specifically, I've been asked to address the impact of American Evangelicalism on The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

A Historical Perspective

Some of you know I have been interested in this topic for a long time. It was an issue that I faced as a young pastor graduating in the early '70s. I'm frank to admit that I was attracted to much of what I found in the world of protestant Evangelicalism. And it was clear that it was becoming an increasingly evangelical world in those days. This was the heyday of Carl Henry and others whose efforts to lift conservative biblical scholarship out of the backwoods of post-war fundamentalism into the mainstream of public consciousness were bearing fruit. The prominent theological journal of these "new evangelicals," as they called themselves, was *Christianity Today*. But its companion journal, *Leadership Magazine*, was even more influential in providing the churches of America and their pastors with practical, hands-on approaches to church policy and programs, relevant and exciting worship and vigorous evangelistic activity all designed to grow the church into a dynamic, robust force for cultural change.

The year 1976 was somewhat of a watershed in the evolution of American Evangelicalism. *Newsweek* magazine, in a cover story in its October issue, labeled 1976 "The Year of the Evangelical." It was clear that the transformation had been

dramatic. The "new evangelicals," as these media-savvy and culturally conscious conservative protestants called themselves, had emerged from bud to flower in a matter of decades. In fact, they were "new" no longer. From then on, they would be known as simply "Evangelicals." That was the year that Chuck Colson, convicted Watergate conspirator, published his spiritual autobiography entitled *Born Again*. From then on Evangelicals were not only a prominent force in American moral and religious culture, but they had also become a political base as well. In 1976 Jimmy Carter, a born-again Bible class teacher from Georgia, was elected president. But before that election campaign was over, Gerald Ford, an Episcopalian from Michigan, publicly identified himself as an Evangelical as well.

The mid-1970s, as you know, was exactly the time when our own church was emerging from its belated battle against biblical higher criticism. I say belated, because the struggle between modernists and conservatives in most other Christian churches was long over by that time. By the grace of God (and by the skin of its teeth) the Synod emerged from its own struggle with its historic confession intact. But it had been a long battle that got ugly at times. Licking its wounds, the Synod naturally looked for allies to help in its recovery. The most likely candidates were those who shared its convictions regarding the inspiration, truth, and reliability of the Holy Scriptures. Synodical leaders had looked to evangelical biblical scholars for assistance in wrestling with the issues raised by higher criticism. And so, it was only natural, now that that unpleasant chapter of the Missouri Synod's history was past, that it borrowed strategies for mission from the Evangelicals as well. Fuller Seminary became the source of much of Missouri's thinking when it came to strategies for outreach and the growth of the church.

Perhaps it only stood to reason that the Missouri Synod would look in such directions for a refinement of its methodologies and strategies. We were an immigrant church, after all. For over a hundred years we had lived here in America with an identity and ethos not overtly American. How could we break the shackles of our "old world" ways and join the twentieth century? How could we speak the timeless truths of the gospel with an American accent in the contemporary world? Those were indeed valid concerns, not unlike the questions raised by the Saxon immigrants and the other founders of the Missouri Synod in the mid-nineteenth century. They, too, found themselves not only in a foreign land with many foreign tongues, but they found themselves in a religious climate permeated with Arminian theology and the "new measures" of revivalism based on religious excitements and techniques designed to heighten those excitements.

But one hundred twenty-odd years later, the threat of frontier revivalism seemed quite far removed. In the mid-1970s the synod emerged from its internal dissension over scriptural authority battered and bruised. To fuel its recovery, it took on a newly invigorated emphasis on evangelism and mission. People were weary of struggle. It

was time for healing. And the banner of outreach was one around which all could unite to cement and heal the fractures caused by decades of infighting. No one wanted to change the church's confession; they merely wanted to explore options for the church's growth.

Of course, it is impossible to separate strategies and options from theology. It is inevitable that methodologies adopted from alien theologies should begin to shape the confession of our church. Synod's founders knew that well. In their first constitution they insisted that the Synod has a vested interest not only in the doctrine of its pastors and congregations, but in their practice as well:

> Synod as a whole is to supervise how each individual pastor cares for the souls in his charge. Synod, therefore, has the right of inquiry and judgment. Especially is synod to investigate whether its pastors have permitted themselves to be misled into applying the so-called "New Measures" which have become prevalent here, or whether they care for their souls according to the sound Scriptural manner of the orthodox Church.[1]

It is an adage among historians that those who don't learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it. And it seems that Missouri was slow to learn her lessons. Having discovered by bitter experience that it was impossible to adopt the methodology of historical criticism without undermining its confession of the Bible, we seem to have bought into the argument that one can look and act like Evangelicals and still believe like Lutherans.

It wasn't long before Missouri's fascination with Evangelicalism became visible. Shortly before his death in 1982, Dr. Martin Scharlemann, who himself played a central role in the Missouri Synod's struggle with Higher Criticism, warned of the looming problem:

> Our Lutheran heritage is threatened not only from the left, by historical critics and their followers, but also from the right, by Fundamentalism [Evangelicalism]. In fact, at the moment, the latter is, by all odds, the more menacing because so much of it sounds very biblical, and also because so many of our fellow conservative Lutherans hear fundamental preachers and read "Evangelical" literature with Lutheran eyes and ears, so to speak, and thus feel at home in the material.[2]

The threat of which Dr. Scharlemann warned has, if anything, intensified in the quarter century since.

The Issues at Stake

Now, on to more contemporary concerns. Is this issue really all that important? What problems does Evangelicalism present to convinced and committed Lutherans? What exactly do Evangelicals teach?

Well, of course, that depends on which Evangelical you talk with. Most students of the movement, while pointing to certain affirmations about Jesus and the Bible common among Evangelicals, agree that it is more of a lifestyle than anything else. The evangelical world is bound together more by its piety and style than it is with doctrine. But here's the point: that piety and that style stem from a particular theology that is foreign to our confession. While it is comfortable speaking about Jesus and his cross and while it affirms biblical authority and even inerrancy, popular Evangelicalism breathes an entirely different air than Reformation theology. Yet it continues to exert influence on the way LCMS pastors preach, teach, and plan and lead the liturgical life of their congregations.

Dr. David Adams has issued a passionate warning about the implications of the path on which we appear to have embarked:

> The primary threat to conservative Lutheranism is not the old-fashioned liberals of the 1960s and '70s but the Neo-Evangelical element that has grown up since the late 1970s and which is intent upon turning the LCMS from being a truly Evangelical Lutheran synod rooted in the theology of the Reformation to being just another American Evangelical group, albeit one with the Lutheran veneer of using wine in the Eucharist and baptizing infants. In the just-over 30 years between the walkout and today, we have come halfway toward their goal. But the real question is not where we are today, but where we will be 30 years from today. Unless this church body changes its current direction, 30 years from today the LCMS will consist of Southern Baptists who just happen to use wine in communion and baptize infants.[3]

In my mind, there are four cardinal elements at stake in the struggle for Lutheran identity in the face of the challenge of Evangelicalism. Remember, my study of the movement began because I was seriously enamored of the movement. In fact, I guess I would have been numbered among those David Adams was talking about—that neo-Evangelical element in the Synod in those heady post-Seminex days. I'm not sure I would have seen it as a distinct turn away from the theology of the Reformation, but I was keenly interested in exploring why it was that Evangelicals seemed to have more zest than the dowdy Lutherans in my congregation. I thought at that time that much of our Lutheran heritage would have to be jettisoned if we were to keep

the ship afloat. I have since come to see that heritage not as ballast, but as treasure. It was not an immediate conversion. But as I studied the phenomenon of American Evangelicalism, I saw that beneath the attractive surface of its easy-going zealousness were some troublesome theological tendencies.[4] My concerns over the years have not waned; in fact, they have intensified. What I see are the following tendencies, all of them inimical not only to our Lutheran Confessions but also to the teachings of the Holy Scriptures and the church catholic.

Theological Characteristics of Evangelicalism

First, among Evangelicals the gospel is essentially mere historical information. It is information about Jesus Christ and his saving work on the cross, and it's true, and it's crucial information. But that's all it is. It's information. From there on, it's up to you. You must act on that information by an act of the will and accept it for it to be of any benefit to you. In contrast, Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions define the gospel as the "power of God for salvation" (Rom 1:17); it is an efficacious word that does what it says.

Second, generally speaking, Evangelicals seem to view sin as a moral blight, a glitch in the human character that can be overcome by making the right choices. Armed with the forgiveness of sins, we are now freed to make those right choices and improve our lot. The Bible and our Confessions, on the other hand, understand sin to be a cosmic tragedy, placing mankind under God's curse: "the sinful mind is enmity against God" (Rom 8:7).

Third, if sin is merely a blight rather than a cosmic disaster, then salvation becomes a repair job rather than a rescue story. And this repair job is a do-it-yourself job. Remember, it's up to you to make the right choices, we are told. Jesus died for you, and you can be forgiven if you make the right choice, if you reach out to him in faith under your own will. But that's only half the story; once you're saved you complete your own repair job by making correct moral choices based on God's law. Lutherans hold a dramatically different view of salvation. We believe in divine monergism; God is the singular and sole cause of our salvation which from first to last is God's gift. "By grace you have been saved, through faith . . ." And even this faith itself is "a gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:8).

Finally, there is a limited understanding of God's law among Evangelicals. The law is understood as a friend to humankind. It stands to reason that if sin is glitch rather than a tragedy and if the gospel is merely information rather than the efficacious power of God for salvation, then the law will be inadequately understood. To be sure, the holy law of God does serve the function of directing the Christian toward a God-pleasing life, but it cannot motivate the Christian along that path. In fact, the Bible itself makes it clear that the law always accuses: "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Rom 3:20).

Today's evangelical world remains more fascinated than ever with the law of God as the central key to overcoming the lingering effects of sin. Purpose-driven and God-directed, people can arrive at that wonderful state of fulfillment that everybody strives for. You can have your best life now!

Evangelicals on Evangelicals

Now lest this evaluation be construed as the private convictions of one old grumpy Lutheran, I will provide a couple of additional perspectives on American Evangelicalism from non-Lutheran sources.

The streams of influence which have shaped today's Evangelicals are many and varied. It finds its roots in New England Calvinism, but the God-centered theology of that original Calvinism has been reversed and eclipsed by man-centered Arminianism, which teaches that the human will is the key agent in conversion and salvation. Calvinism and Arminianism have both molded and shaped the image of public Christianity in our land, but the old Calvinism has largely been set aside. The strong base of New England Calvinism first faced the determined onslaught of Pietism, which soft pedaled the means of grace, and then Revivalism, which is the earliest example of American church growth theory at its worst. Charles Finney, the famous frontier revivalist, deserves more attention from Lutherans not because of his teaching, which was decidedly heretical, but because of his influence in America, which was simply all pervasive—and continues to surface and resurface in our land to this very day. According to David Wells, distinguished Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Finney's "revivalistic Arminianism eventually stifled, if not supplanted, the older form of Reformation thinking, and it has continued to flow through our own century, losing depth as it has gained breadth, finally spilling out over most of contemporary evangelicalism."[5]

Wells charges Evangelicalism with giving up the gospel. In making the church-going public a consumer and the gospel a product, it has set aside the sovereignty of God in favor of the sovereignty of man. It has turned the church into a human organization instead of a divine organism, a place to meet people rather than a place to meet God, a commodity for consumption rather than a voice calling for repentance. "It is not difficult to see," Wells continues, "how the marketeer's evangelicalism might begin to resemble the old liberalism, the gospel H. Richard Niebuhr once described as consisting in a God without wrath bringing people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross."[6]

To be most effective in the pagan world in which we live, Wells suggests, the church will have to be the church, countercultural in both style and substance. It will have to bring the world something transcendent, rather than falling all over itself to bring the world what it already has. Wells calls the church in our time to repent of its worldliness:

> God now rests too inconsequentially upon the church. His Word, if it is preached at all, does not summon enough. His Christ, if he is seen at all, is impoverished, thin, pale, and scarcely capable of inspiring awe, and his riches are entirely searchable. If God is at the center of the worship, one has to wonder why there is so much surrounding the center that is superfluous to true worship—indeed, counterproductive to it. It is God that the church needs most—God in his grace and truth, God in his awesome and holy presence, not a folder full of hot ideas for reviving the church's flagging programs.[7]

But the real problem is not merely practical, but theological. Already back in 1975 William Wells and John Woodbridge identified what amounts to nothing less than a Copernican revolution brought about in the theological universe by twentieth-century American Evangelicals and their nineteenth-century revivalist forebears:

> In the reformers' formulation and well into the nineteenth century, evangelicalism was God's way of salvation, not only in the offering of it to men but in the applying of it to their hearts as well. Last century, however, the evangel began to be seen more as the divine offer of grace and not so much the divine application of grace.[8]

Once you have made the gospel only the offer of grace and not the application itself, of course, everything else in theology must shift. Then the central concern becomes not God, but man. Then the thrust of the gospel becomes not the forgiveness of sins *coram Deo*, but human ethics and moral improvement. And this, of course, is exactly what is at stake when we're talking about the impact of American Evangelicalism on Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod pastors: the nature and power of the gospel.

The Central Article

If the gospel is to be understood primarily in a therapeutic manner as an instrument for self-improvement, then the gospel is gutted of its content. The beating heart of the Augsburg Confession is Article IV:

> Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Rom 3:21–26; 4:5).[9]

The doctrine of imputed righteousness may have gone out of fashion among the churches of the Reformation, but it remains no less important to the health and welfare of the church. If it is true, as we have claimed, that this is the article upon which the church stands or falls, we must in all honesty say that Lutheranism is at best limping along in our time. There are a lot of other seemingly more important things to focus on in the twenty-first century; the missionary task grows ever more difficult as the Christian veneer of western culture peels back to reveal an increasingly secularized world. While the contemporary world grows ever more spiritually attuned, its spirituality is sometimes subtly and at other times overtly pagan in both style and substance. In such a world, it is tempting to give up what we know to be central because other things seem more pressing. But we do so at great peril. Nearly fifty years ago the German theologian Hans Joachim Iwand wrote:

> An evangelical church which looks upon the doctrine of justification by faith as a self-evident banality one no longer needs to dwell upon because other problems are more pressing has robbed itself of the possibility of arriving at solutions to such problems. It will only tear itself further apart. If the article on justification is removed from the center, we will very soon no longer know why we are and must remain evangelical Christians. Then we will strive for the unity of the church and sacrifice the purity of the gospel; we will expect more from church order and government, from the reform of ecclesiastical office and church discipline, than these can deliver. One will flatter piety and despise doctrine; one will run the risk of becoming tolerant where one should be radical and radical where one should be tolerant—in short, the standards will be skewed and therewith also what is necessary and right in all the reforms for which we struggle today will no longer be comprehensible.[10]

His words seem eerily prophetic of the situation in the LCMS today. Not only have we begun to address the unity of the Synod by means of church order and structure, largely neglecting the purity of the gospel, but we are increasingly focused on piety while de facto despising doctrine.

Donald Bloesch, an eminent Reformed systematician, provided a distant early warning about the situation we find in contemporary American Evangelicalism. In 1973 he wrote: "[Among the Evangelicals] it is not the justification of the ungodly, which formed the basic motif in the Lutheran Reformation and also in neo-orthodoxy, but the sanctification of the righteous that is given the most attention."[11]

Once the sanctification of the righteous takes precedent over the justification of the ungodly, the cart is placed before the horse theologically speaking, and

ecclesiastically speaking, its fruit basket upset. This helps us understand the incongruous popularity of Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Life* in Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod parishes. Not only have we lost focus on the justification of the ungodly, but we have lost touch with our own doctrine of sanctification. Though our catechism is replete with a rich teaching of the sanctified life, we seem to grow ever more fascinated with other, more man-centered doctrines of sanctification. This is not, I'm convinced, because we have found that we need something to supplement and complement our understanding of justification; it's because we have begun to consider the justification of the ungodly irrelevant—a "self-evident banality," as Iwand phrased it.

And this is dangerous. Once the justification of the ungodly for Christ's sake through faith becomes trite and commonplace, then like spiritual junkies we'll have to search for a quicker and more satisfying high. And, of course, junkies discover that when highs get harder to come by, you need bigger and more frequent hits to achieve the results you crave. No wonder, then, that the evangelical world is populated with spiritual pushers, marketing higher highs to ever more jaded consumers of spiritual goods. Like latter-day John Tetzels, the hawkers of today's spiritual wares promise instant gratification and immediate results. Now, as in the sixteenth century, there appear to be plenty of ready and willing customers.

Evangelical Dysfunction

Back in 1993, Os Guinness pondered the future of Evangelicalism in his perceptive book; *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Postmodernity.*[12] The title plays off the famous advice of Geoffrey Chaucer that you need a very long spoon when eating with devils.[13] Applying this adage to the contemporary evangelical scene, Guinness warned against an unholy alliance of the church with prevailing cultural trends. There is a danger in hitching your wagon to a star that is doomed eventually to implode. If you marry the culture, you're destined to become an early widower. What happens, Guinness wondered, when the loaves and fishes run out? What happens when the great megachurches are turned into warehouses?

Ominous Signs

While we're not exactly there yet, there are some interesting developments in public church life in America that may be the first rumblings of a seismic disaster in the evangelical world. Sally Morgenthaler, founder of the worship resource website Sacramentis.com, announced publicly that not only had she dismantled her website, but that she was taking time out to rethink her position on so-called worship evangelism. "Worship Evangelism" is the attempt to attract unbelievers to the church through services with a "wow factor" designed to impress and impact consumers of the religious experience using high-powered music performed by professional-quality

artists. In such a heady atmosphere, of course, size matters. In the 1990s there were start-up churches springing up across the country, "all competing with each other for that upwardly mobile, savvy church shopper."[14] Yet in just a few short years, the scene had shifted. By the early 2000s those churches that hadn't reached their "critical mass" were in deep trouble. To be sure, those churches with 1,000 or more attendees and with powerful personalities in leadership roles still seemed to grow exponentially, but their growth seemed to have less and less impact on the unbelieving population.

Morgenthaler quotes some interesting statistics in her recent article in REV! magazine in which she publicly distances herself from the "worship evangelism" movement. In just five years the number of megachurches in the United States—that is, those with weekly attendance over 2,000, nearly doubled. Yet over the same period, the number of adults who did not attend church nearly doubled as well.[15]

Now of course megachurches do not represent all churches in America. Most American churches are quite small. Still, the myth persists that Americans are a church-going people. Morgenthaler points out that although telephone pollsters report a consistent 40 percent of the American populace in church, actual seat counts and exit polls show a steadily declining rate: down from 20.4 percent in 1990 to only 17.4 percent in 2006.[16] In short, the loaves and fishes are already running out—and the transformation of megachurches into warehouses may not be far behind. Morgenthaler provides her own assessment of evangelism methodology: "as culture has become incessantly more spiritual and adamantly less religious, we at Sacramentis have become convinced that the primary meeting place with our unchurched friends is now outside the church building."[17]

Now that sounds quite radical in the face of the concerted efforts of those who followed the "if you build it, they will come" approach to reaching unbelievers in our culture over the last decade and a half. Yet this is basic biblical teaching: "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). The public liturgy is the worship of the baptized where Jesus Christ is preached as both God and Lord, crucified and risen for the sins of the whole world—where repentance and forgiveness of sins are preached in his name until the end of time—where the baptized eat and drink his sacred body and most holy blood for the forgiveness of their sins, proclaiming his death until he comes in glory. These are the mysteries of God entrusted to the church, and they are not for sale. They cannot be packaged and sold; they must rather be proclaimed and celebrated to tend Christ's sheep and lambs, the flock of God which he has purchased with his own blood.

Of course, Jesus has other sheep which are not of this fold. In a post-Christian culture, it is even more urgent that the church pays attention to gathering in the lost. But we can learn from the church in the pre-Christian world of the New Testament; early Christians engaged the unchurched not in "seeker services," but in the every-day world of commerce, trade, and work. There they showed that they were lights in this

dark world and spoke of the hope that was in them as they had opportunity. If we do the same, then now, as then, the Lord will add to our number those who are being saved. The Holy Spirit continues in every age to call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify the church through the gospel.

Americans, of course, have always loved a good show. And they are optimistic about business enterprise. Ethel Merman and P. T. Barnum summed it up well: there may be "no business like show business"—but in the entertainment industry "there's a sucker born every minute." It's no wonder, then, that business should be slacking off. For if Morgenthaler is right; our world is growing incessantly more spiritual and adamantly less religious at the same time. Irreligious people are less willing to be suckers; when the church wants to sell them something, it's "buyer beware." The old paradigm has had its day; it's time for a radical new departure.

The Challenge: Evangelical and Lutheran

What is needed is not a head-in-the-sand, knee-jerk conservatism that attempts to turn back the pages of history. We are called not to flee from the contemporary world, but to actively engage it with the clarion call of gospel truth. What the unbelieving world needs to see in the church is not a dim parody of itself, but the company of the redeemed, Christ's church in earth and heaven—both transcendent in scope and imminent in mission, solid and eternal, yet concrete and personal.

And nothing could be more solidly eternal and concretely personal than the core of our identity as Lutherans. "Our theology," wrote Martin Luther, "is a theology of the cross." Not just a preaching *about* Jesus and his cross, but the preaching *of* Jesus and his cross: Jesus Christ, the One who once was dead, but now is alive forevermore. Jesus Christ, the victim and redeemer, who is now the victor and Lord. Jesus Christ, personally present in his preached Word and administered Sacraments for the healing, life, and salvation of penitent sinners.

This is gospel ministry that is truly evangelical in the best sense of Reformation theology and at the same time sensitive to the unique mission challenges of our time. The central article must remain the central article. Justification is not a "self-evident banality," but the central transcendent truth of the dynamic gospel of God, which has the power to forgive iniquity, to redeem sinners and to clothe the ungodly with the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself.

There remain only two religions in the world—the righteousness that is by works and the righteousness that is by faith. St. Paul's timeless distinction remains the litmus test for faithfulness in every age. Dr. Michael Horton points out the lingering and devastating effect of Finney's frontier revivalism on the Reformation doctrine of justification:

> In today's climate, American Protestantism on the left and the right is committed to Finney's legacy, whether it knows it or not. It can be recognized in the "social gospel" of the left and in the moralistic jeremiads of the right; in the "how-to" pragmatism of the church growth movement and the vast self-help literature and preaching that have become the diet in the Christian subculture; and in the therapeutic obsession with inner spirituality and social activism that one finds in the Emergent movement. Even if the gospel is formally affirmed, it becomes a tool for engineering personal and public life (salvation by works) rather than an announcement that God's just wrath toward us has been satisfied and his unmerited favor has been freely bestowed in Jesus Christ.[18]

Yes, justification still matters. It matters not because it is useful, but because it is true. But it is also useful. Justification by faith is not a left-over vestige of a by-gone era, a quaint relic from the past, but the lasting legacy of those who are convinced that all theology is Christology, that there is no gospel other than that delivered once unto the saints, that there is no other name given among men whereby we must be saved than the name above all other names, that there remains for all time no other message than the preaching of Jesus Christ and him crucified, stumbling block to some and folly to others—but to those who are called by that very preaching, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Yes, despite the persistent and detrimental effect of contemporary Evangelicalism, we must not relinquish that precious title, but reclaim it—and then redefine it for our Evangelical friends. Lutherans are and ever must remain evangelically Lutheran—that is, people of the gospel. But we must take care to remain Evangelical Lutherans, not Lutheran Evangelicals.

Evangelicalism's Influence on the LCMS

That's a distinction not easily maintained in our current environment. A lay friend of mine conducted an informal poll among his Evangelical and Evangelical Lutheran friends.[19] He found the same diversity among both groups. To the question "What is the Gospel?" he received the following responses: "The way to live by" and "Jesus died and rose to save us." To the question "What is the purpose of the Bible?" Evangelicals and Lutherans had responses ranging from "To make us wise unto salvation" on the one hand to "God's instruction book" or "To instruct people on the way to live" on the other.

Over the past three months I have conducted my own little research project addressing the influence of Evangelicalism on pastors of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.[20] It's hardly a scientific sampling, but I did manage to obtain 153

responses to my survey. Thirteen pastors served congregations of less than 100 communicants; seventy-two served churches of between 100 and 300 communicants; twenty-two served in congregations of between 300 and 500 communicants, thirty-five served between 500 and 1000 communicants, and eleven served churches of more than 1000 communicants.

To be honest, what I found surprised me. Discounting the fact that my little survey is only anecdotal evidence and not hard data, it appears that only a very small minority of LCMS pastors regularly rely on American Evangelical resources. Furthermore, from the small sampling that I received, it is hard to extrapolate on any patterns that are emerging. Approximately 10 percent of the pastors in each membership category were exploring a variety of resources from such prominent Evangelical agencies as Purpose Driven Ministries, the Willow Creek Association, and *Leadership* magazine, yet these totals were not statistically overwhelming. Six out of the 153 pastors, for example, indicated interest in Purpose Driven Ministries. The only statistically interesting figure is that three out of the eleven responding pastors of the largest membership category churches, or 27 percent, indicate that they regularly use materials from the Willow Creek Association, but at the same time, one pastor each in the 100–300 and 300–500 categories also use those materials.

What this all means I leave to the statistical analysts and political pundits. I suspect that, like all statistics, they can be used to prove a variety of different preconceived notions. But what is for certain is that we face a crisis in American Lutheran theology uncannily like the one faced by Lutherans in this country a hundred and fifty years ago.[21] Then, as now, justification by faith had fallen on hard times. Then, as now, Lutherans were casting envious eyes in the direction of the practices of indigenously American churches who seemed to be more adept at connecting with the American scene. Then, as now, much of Lutheran theology and liturgical practice was considered expendable baggage left over from the old country. Then, as now, the spotlight was more squarely on religious excitements than on the means of grace, which seem decidedly dull in comparison.

It remains for each generation in turn to reclaim and defend its doctrinal heritage and then to use that heritage not as a dead and empty tradition, but as a living tool with which to proclaim the gospel and win the lost. The church and her pastors are engaged in a great relay race, each generation receiving the baton from those who have run the race before it. You know that in a relay it's not only important to extend yourself when you run your own lap, but to be particularly alert and adept at the handoff of the baton. At this juncture in history, Lutherans will have to guard the rich doctrinal tradition they have inherited, viewing that tradition in its truly biblical sense: a *paradosis* (2 Thes 2:15)—that is, that which has been "handed over" from Jesus to his apostles to his church. But we don't merely guard this doctrine, we use it in actively reaching the lost and teaching the faithful. Such doctrine is not

amorphous; it has a specific "shape" or "pattern:" (*hypotyposis*) that must be followed (2 Tm 1:13), not out of obstinacy, but out of faithfulness to the Lord who has bequeathed it to his church and out of concern for the lost whom he has purchased with his own blood.

As I mentioned earlier, doctrinal faithfulness had better be more than mere nostalgia for simpler days. We are not called to ministry in the 1930s or the 1850s or the 1580s. We are called to proclaim and teach in this our own generation, with all its glorious possibilities and looming dangers.

Contemporary Spirituality

There remain two polarities in doctrinal faithfulness. One of these, to be sure, is diligent study and careful adherence to the pattern of sound words of those who have gone before. We must do our homework; each generation stands on the shoulders of those who come before it. So, there is the hard work of serious theological reflection and careful teaching to be done.

But the second focus is also important; namely, we must know our contemporaries. We must contact and connect with this, our present generation. We must know its values, its dreams and aspirations, its fears and apprehensions. We must be students of our culture, in other words.

Here the evangelical world has proven quite adept. Evangelicals are keen students of the culture, and they have their finger on the pulse of the world we live in. But it's a case of right diagnosis, wrong prescription. While correctly identifying the mindset of the unbelieving world, Evangelicals try to accommodate themselves to it, remodeling the church deliberately into the image and likeness of a world that grows increasingly narcissistic, individualist, syncretistic, and overtly pagan. There is plenty of evidence for this trend all around.

Moral Therapeutic Deism

Two years ago, Christian Smith, sociology professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and noted researcher, published a comprehensive study of the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers entitled *Soul Searching*.[22] His agency, the National Survey of Youth and Religion (NSYR) conducted a nationally representative telephone survey of 3290 English- and Spanish-speaking teenagers between 13 and 17, and of their parents. The research was conducted from July 2002–April 2003 by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill researchers using a random-digit-dial (RDD) method, employing a sample of randomly generated telephone numbers representative of all household telephones in the fifty states.

Analysis of the resulting data shows that the NSYR provides a nearly perfectly representative sample of 13–17-year-olds living in US households.

> Based on these inter-dataset analyses, we can say with some confidence that findings from the NSYR appear to offer a reasonably unbiased representation of the sampled population and so, particularly when region and income are weighted, might be assumed to accurately describe the population of U.S. teenagers aged 13–17 and their parents living in residential households.

What Smith presents in his book is not only a fascinating profile of today's youth, but a fairly accurate projection of what tomorrow's adults will be like religiously speaking. We can see from his research that we live in a highly spiritualized religious climate. Forty percent of his surveyed teens reported that they attended religious services once a week or more, while only 18 percent never attend.

Especially interesting to anyone who grew up in the rebellious '60s are two of Smith's findings, namely that the vast majority of American teenagers are *exceedingly conventional* (emphasis Smith's) in their religious identity and practices.[24] And he also found that the vast majority of youth reported that they largely share their parents' beliefs and have very little conflict with family members over religious matters.[25] In other words, these kids believe largely what their parents believe. Here is where it gets interesting.

What Smith discovered is that, despite all the concerted efforts of Evangelicalism in the last three decades to Christianize American culture, America has its own unique religion which he labels "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." Its creed can be summarized concisely, if alarmingly, under five succinct points:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in ones' life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.[26]

You can read the book for yourself. It is carefully researched and painstakingly documented. Read it and weep. Weep for those who hold this empty, vacuous faith, certainly. But also weep for yourselves and for your children. For this is the religious climate of the world we live in, and you can be sure that moralistic therapeutic deism exerts its unrelenting pressure on the people who sit in the pews of the most conservative and confessionally orthodox of our congregations.

That this sort of deistic nonsense exists is nothing new, of course. It has been around ever since our first parents elected themselves God in the garden and came up with their own religion that called good evil, and evil good.

What is alarming, however, is that this kind of legalistic gruel and thinly disguised paganism should be so prominently represented among the youth of Smith's sampling. Youth who appear to be emulating the religious beliefs of their parents. Youth who report that they go to church faithfully and regularly. This is a snapshot of American spirituality, despite the concerted and organized efforts of conservative Evangelicalism to evangelize and impact American culture for more than three decades. Sadly, we must conclude that there is plenty of evidence for Sally Morgenthaler's characterization of contemporary schizophrenic spirituality, which grows "incessantly more spiritual and adamantly less religious" at one and the same time.[27]

How pervasive are these views, you ask? Smith reports that these perceptions are especially the case among mainline Protestant and Catholic youth, but "also visible among black and conservative Protestants, Jewish teens, other religious types of teenagers, and even many non-religious teenagers in the United States."[28]

It's in the water, in other words. This is the kind of religious climate in which we live. Moralistic, therapeutic, and deistic. A non-personal god who's nice to have around when you're in a jam, but who essentially watches this world from a distance. A god who wants everyone to be good and play nice in the sandbox of life but doesn't trouble himself to judge anyone—good people all go to heaven when they die, after all.

What goes around comes around. This kind of god sounds very much like Niebuhr's description of the god of liberalism: "a god without wrath bringing people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross."[29] That this religious view should be common this late in the day, so to speak, is remarkable. The old liberals have come and gone. Conservative Protestantism Evangelicalism has constituted the public face of Christianity in our land for nearly half a century. To be sure, many Evangelicals fight vigorously and daily against this kind of theology, yet the tragic reality is that in its eagerness to remold the church and make it more palatable to supposed seekers, Evangelicalism has absorbed into itself the therapeutic goals of a narcissistic culture.

Evangelical Lutheranism, on the other hand, is well equipped to evangelize such a culture. With our strong biblical base, our incarnational foundation, with our sacramental focus and liturgical shape[30] we are distinctly well suited for the task. The question is, are we up to it?

In David Adam's provocative essay, he issues a challenge which we will all do well to consider. The pervasive influence of American Evangelicalism is everywhere. Adams calls this a struggle for the soul of our church,[31] and I agree with him. Nothing less is at stake.

What is needed in this struggle are courageous, winsome pastors who will both hold fast to the faith and hold it forth. Equally important are faithful, supportive laity who will share that faith in word and deed.

But remember, this is not a political struggle, though it indeed has political

aspects. This is fundamentally a spiritual struggle. We don't get to pick our battles in any generation; we are confronted with them. When we contend for the faith once delivered to the saints there will always be opposition. The only tools we have to defend the faith are the same ones we have to teach the faith. These tools were hand designed by the Lord of the church himself: his living Word and his holy Sacraments. Through these, as through means, God gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where it pleases, in those who hear the gospel.

There's no room for ugliness and bitterness in this struggle, but there's no need for panic either. Calm and winsome always works better than frantic and contentious. The counsel of Paul to Timothy sets the tone for the task ahead of us. In the same breath as he warns this fledgling pastor about the itching ears of those who seek teachers for themselves to suit their own passions, Paul urges Timothy to both steadiness and diligence: "As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry" (2 Tm 4:5).

Notice that ministry and evangelism go together. It's a package deal. That's why we are and ever must remain Evangelical Lutherans!

Endnotes

1 W. G. Polack, ed., "Constitution of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States," trans. Ray (sic) Suelflow, *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (April 1943): 12–13.
2 Martin H. Scharlemann, *Affirm* 9, no. 5 (Feb./March 1982): 2.
3 David Adams, "Lutheran Evangelicalism and Evangelical Lutheranism" (unpublished manuscript, 2005): 15.
4 For a comprehensive overview of the development of American Evangelicalism and a Lutheran evaluation of its teachings, see Harold Senkbeil, *Sanctification: Christ in Action—Evangelical Challenge and Lutheran Response* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1989).
5 David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 32.
6 David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 82.
7 Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 225.
8 Wm. Wells and John Woodbridge, eds., *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They are Changing* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 35.
9 Article IV, The Augsburg Confession: Justification, *Concordia, The Lutheran Confessions: A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 59.
10 Hans Joachim Iwand, *Glaubensgerechtigkeit nach Luthers Lehre* (München, Chr. Kaier Verlag, 1959), 3 quoted in Gerhard Forde, "The Exodus from Virtue to Grace: Justification by Faith Today" *Interpretation* 44, no. 1 (1980): 32.
11 Donald G. Bloesch, *The Evangelical Renaissance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 37.
12 Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993).
13 Geoffrey Chaucer, "Therfore bihoveth hire a ful long spoon that shall ete with a feend." *The Canterbury Tales: The Squire's Tale*, line 602 quoted in *Familiar Quotations by John Bartlett* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955), 82.
14 Sally Morgenthaler, "Worship as Evangelism: Sally Morgenthaler rethinks her own paradigm," *REV!* (May/June 2007): 50.
15 Morgenthaler, "Worship as Evangelism": 51.
16 Research by www.theamericanchurch.org, quoted in Morgenthaler, "Worship as Evangelism": 51.
17 Morgenthaler, "Worship as Evangelism": 53.
18 Michael S. Horton, "Does Justification Still Matter?" *Modern Reformation* (September/October 2007):12.
19 "Gospel/Bible Poll" taken from August 29 through September 16, 2007, by W. I. Strieter, Toledo, Ohio.
20 Charted results of this survey are available at concordiatheology.org.
21 For a discussion of "American Lutheranism" and its cardinal tenets, see Vergilius Ferm, *The Crisis in American Theology* (New York: The Century Company, 1927).
22 Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: University Press, 2005).
23 Smith, *Soul Searching*, 295.
24 Smith, *Soul Searching*, 120.
25 Smith, *Soul Searching*, 122.
26 Smith, *Soul Searching*, 162f.
27 Morgenthaler, "Worship as Evangelism": 53.
28 Smith, *Soul Searching*, 163.
29 Quoted in Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 82.
30 For a discussion of these themes central to Lutheran identity, see Harold Senkbeil, *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994).
31 Adams, "Lutheran Evangelicalism and Evangelical Lutheranism": 14.

Homiletical Helps

Anatomy of a Sermon
"Peace For Life and Death" (Luke 2:22–40) by Bruce Keseman

Peter Nafzger

Today I invite you to live and die with peace. Like St. Simeon. And St. Robert. You've met St. Simeon in our text, Luke chapter 2. I will introduce you later to St. Robert.

Grace to you and . . . peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

The first words in a sermon do more than break the silence. They are "the beginning of a new experience . . . and they point toward the end of that experience."[1] Functionally, the introduction makes a promise about what the hearers can expect. Often the promise is implicit. For example, the preacher who begins by reading the text on which the sermon is based promises indirectly to spend time considering that text. Or the preacher who begins with a contemporary story about the Christian life hints that the sermon will have something to say to the specific context in which these specific hearers live. Other times, however, the promise in the introduction is more explicit. The preacher puts his cards on the table and tells his hearers what he plans to do with the sermon from the start.

In the first words of *this* sermon, Pastor Bruce Keseman makes his promise explicitly by committing himself to two things. First, he announces *what* he is trying to accomplish in this sermon. Namely, he promises to help his hearers "live and die

Editor's note

The sermon, preached at the Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis on January 31, 2024, is represented here in italic type which can be read all at once by following the gray bars. A recording of this sermon is available at https://scholar.csl.edu/cs2324/77/.

in peace." Second, he tells them *how* he hopes to do this. Without telegraphing the entire sermon, he announces that he will discuss the lives of two saints—one known and one unknown. By naming St. Simeon, he promises to dig more deeply into this text. By naming St. Robert, he promises to introduce someone new. This piques their curiosity and encourages them to stick with him.

> *I'm always nervous when I preach. When I preached as a seminarian, I was nervous on steroids. One Sunday, my field-ed pastor was away. He asked me to fill the pulpit. I might have declined if I knew who the guest presiding minister would be that day. Professor Pokorny. That's Professor Pokorny who taught my first preaching class. I would have been uneasy if Professor Pokorny were sitting in the congregation where I could see him. I was far more uneasy when he was behind me. Where I could not see him. But when I said something wrong or did something differently than he taught me, the congregation could see every pained expression on his face.*

In his *Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle noted that speakers have three modes of persuasion at their disposal: *logos*, pathos, and *ethos*. *Logos* refers to the content of what is said—the argument, the substance, the characteristics of the message. *Pathos* refers to the emotional state of the hearers—the effect that the speaker has on their hearts and passions. *Ethos* refers to the character of the speaker—the relationship of trust and credibility that exists between the one speaking and the ones listening.

In this paragraph, Keseman works with *ethos*. To build rapport with his hearers, he makes himself vulnerable by sharing his own anxieties about preaching. This is important for this sermon because most of the hearers do not know him personally. By telling a story about preaching in front of his homiletics professor he makes a connection with students who are familiar with the stress of professors looking on. Rather than positioning himself as an expert (which he could have done, both as a seasoned pastor and as a member of the Seminary's Board of Regents), he leads with humility. This accomplishes three things. First, it makes him more approachable. Second, it makes his message more "existentially authentic."[2] Third, it helps him transition into the text through a connection with Mary.

> *I wonder if Mary felt that unease as she approached the temple with forty-day old Jesus. She had never before offered a sacrifice for purification after childbirth. What if she said or did something wrong? In God's house. With priests watching. Priests might be more intimidating than homiletics professors. Plus, I cannot help but wonder if Mary felt self-conscious when she saw other mothers bringing lambs as their purification sacrifice. She could only afford the poor person's substitute. Two pigeons or two turtle doves.*

But Mary was not only at the temple for her purification. She also arrived with Joseph so Jesus could be bought back. Ever since God spared every firstborn Israelite male at the Passover, all firstborn Israelite males belonged to God. They had to be bought back. Joseph and Mary intended to buy back the One who would buy them back. They were at the temple to redeem the Redeemer. That would make me nervous.

As they arrive for the purification and presentation, Mary encounters something else that likely gave her pause. Or, rather, someone else. Moms, how would you respond if some stranger asked to hold your newborn baby? Simeon wants to hold Jesus. Luke does not tell us how old Simeon was. Maybe Simeon was frail. Maybe Simeon had tremors like I do.

I do not know the conversation between our Lord's earthly parents and St. Simeon. But I know the outcome. Simeon ends up with baby Jesus in his hands. And Simeon acts like he has just stepped one foot into heaven. He exclaims, "Lord, now you let your servant go in peace. Your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all people." He might have added, "And my hands are holding the salvation which you have prepared for all people."

I spoke to my brother yesterday. He works for a company with a fleet of trucks. My brother oversees safety. On Monday, one of his drivers—thirty-something years old—died in his sleeper cab. While resting at a truck stop. You do not know when you will die. I do not know when I will die. Maybe I won't survive this sermon. One of my friends died while preaching. Simeon did not know if he would live a few more minutes, a few more years, or a few more decades. It did not matter. He had seen his salvation! Simeon did not have to worry what his sin would do to him. Simeon did not have to worry about his status with the Almighty. Simeon did not have to worry about his fate on judgment day. Simeon could depart from the temple in peace. Simeon could live in peace. And Simeon could die in peace.

When preaching from narrative texts, preachers have several options for how they might help the hearers interact with the Scriptures. One approach involves drawing an idea out of the text and setting it before the hearers for contemplation and reflection. This is what happens in so-called "expository" preaching. (Note that the word "expository" comes from the Latin *ex-* [out of, from] and *ponere* [to set or put].) But preachers have another option. They can choose to work in the other direction. Rather than taking a teaching out of the text and setting it before the hearers, the preacher can bring the hearers into the narrative and help them experience it from within. This is what happens in so-called narrative preaching.

Keseman takes the second approach. He brings the hearers into the text and introduces St. Simeon via the experience of Mary. "I wonder if Mary felt that unease

as she approached the temple . . ." With these words, he slows down the hearers' experience with the text and encourages them to imagine what it was like for Mary. Then, from within the narrative, he highlights three aspects of this text that are not named explicitly but clearly stand in the background: (1) the inexperience of Mary as a new mother, (2) the public nature of fulfilling the law in front of religious authorities, and (3) the maternal concern over a strange and frail man holding her child.

Speaking of Simeon, Keseman makes two additional comments that are subtle yet significant. First, preachers are sometimes tempted to add to the Scriptures through traditions and assumptions. Tradition suggests that Simeon was an old man. In fact, one tradition says he was old enough to have translated part of the Septuagint, which would make him 360 years old! Keseman does well to acknowledge that the text doesn't say how old Simeon was. Second, Keseman brings up something about his person that the hearers saw as he was preaching—his slight tremor. This was not a significant distraction, but it was noticeable. Aware of this, he names it. Without giving it more attention than necessary, he disarms the potential for distraction and allows the hearers to move on without dwelling on it.

> *Wouldn't you like the privilege of holding Jesus in your hands so you could live and die with peace? You have an even greater privilege than holding Jesus in your hands. You get Jesus in your body. In the Lord's Supper.*
>
> *Simeon knew that baby in his hands was his salvation. But Simeon did not know how Jesus would be his salvation. You do. You know about Jesus's cross. You know what caused that sword to pierce Mary's soul. You know how the Father laid on his Son the iniquity of us all. You know how he bore our grief and carried our sorrow. That would be all the iniquity, all the grief, and all the sorrow that can keep you from your Lord's peace. All borne by Jesus.*
>
> *Trusting him, you do not have to worry what your sins will do to you. You do not have to worry about your status with the Almighty. You do not have to worry about your fate on judgment day. That's been covered by the baby Simeon held. The baby who did not remain a baby but grew and became strong, as Luke tells us. Strong enough to redeem you thirty-three years later. Whether you live a few more minutes or a few more decades, you can live in peace and die in peace. Like Simeon. The Holy Supper assures you.*
>
> *Notice where Simeon's words appear in the liturgy. Right after we receive Jesus's body and blood. That's when we sing, "Lord, now you let Your servant depart in peace. Your word has been fulfilled." You promised to send salvation to me. And you did. You promised he would live and die for me. And he did. You promised to use bread and wine to put his body and blood in me. And you just did. Your word has been fulfilled.*
>
> *"My own eyes have seen," my own tongue has tasted, my own throat has*

swallowed "the salvation which You have prepared for all people." All people. Even people like me. I so often act like I don't have salvation. I can't possibly live for the Lord the way I'd like without the nourishment of Jesus. I have so much turmoil around me that I need the Lord's peace constantly. And I have it. Because I have Jesus. In bread and wine. So do you.

You get to live with peace and die with peace. Like St. Simeon.

Lutherans often mention the sacraments in their sermons. That is good and right, for God's promises in baptism and the Lord's Supper are a central part of our life together. Sometimes, however, the sacraments are simply named without unpacking their significance. Beginning preachers frequently make passing mention of "Baptism and Holy Communion" near the end of the sermon as a type of shibboleth for their sacramental orthodoxy. This runs the risk of violating Francis Rossow's rule against "token" Gospel proclamation.[3] Keseman successfully avoids turning the sacraments into such a platitude. Instead of mechanically listing the means of grace, he focuses the congregation's attention on a single sacrament and mines it deeply. This is a model for beginning preachers. It is often more effective to select a single means of the gospel and explore aspects of it throughout the sermon.[4] This prevents the sacraments from becoming sermonic white noise.

What does Pastor Keseman say about the Lord's Supper? Quite a bit, actually. He emphasizes the real presence of Jesus in the bread and wine by comparing communicants to Simeon who held the baby Jesus in his hands. He highlights the function of the Lord's Supper by emphasizing it as an assurance of the promise of forgiveness and life. Recalling the sermon's introduction, he encourages the hearers to imagine reception of the Lord's Supper as an aid toward living and dying in peace. Most importantly, he uses the Lord's Supper to proclaim the first-to-second person promise of God in Christ directly to his hearers. The Lord's Supper is, after all, nothing more than a visible promise of the God. Rather than merely talking *about* the promise and how it is delivered, he proclaims it. Keseman will return to the Lord's Supper again near the end of the sermon, which reminds us that there is more than enough to say about a single means of grace in a single sermon.

The connection in this sermon to the Lord's Supper is not textual but liturgical. Luke 2, after all, mentions neither bread, nor wine, nor the night Jesus was betrayed. This does not mean the preacher cannot bring this into the sermon, however. Because Simeon's song is closely associated with the preacher's liturgical tradition, there is a justifiable reason to include it in this sermon.[5] Homileticians recognize this as appropriate attention to the "synchronic liturgical context."[6]

And St. Robert. I promised to introduce you to St Robert. We usually called him Bob. I met him back in the early 1990s when he became a member of the

congregation I serve. It was a genuine privilege to know Bob. His dear wife JoAnn remains a member of our church.

One Sunday in July 1995, my sister-in-law Barbara struck up a conversation with Bob following worship. At the time Bob was barely in his sixties. (As a sixty-year-old, I consider that quite young.) Barbara was still in her twenties. Both had just been infused with the body and blood of the salvation once held by Simeon. Maybe Bob was thinking about Simeon's words. That or something else prompted him to tell Barbara that while he was in no hurry to die, whenever God chose to take him home, he was ready. Bob had . . . peace.

Bob—St. Robert—certainly lived with peace. Bob knew that when he drove his rig, he was serving his Lord and his neighbor. Because his neighbors needed the items Bob hauled in that truck. When you carry out your vocations with faith in Jesus, you please the Lord as Bob did. Live in peace. Carry out your vocations in peace.

Bob also used driving as an opportunity to proclaim Jesus. If you passed him on the interstate, you would have seen lettered on the side of Bob's truck the words, "Christ is our Savior." He talked on the CB about Jesus. Young people, if you don't know what a CB is, ask a professor who is my age. One day Bob was talking on the CB to a trucker coming the opposite direction, hauling a load across the country. Bob told the other trucker about the awesome Easter service at our church the previous Sunday. It turns out Bob was talking to my brother! I can't help but wonder how many lives the Holy Spirit changed using Bob. The Holy Spirit also uses you, too.

I'll assume that some people who heard Bob speaking rolled their eyes. But no matter how they responded, Jesus still died and rose for Bob. Bob still had Jesus's body and blood inside him. Bob still had Jesus's peace. Bob did not live sinlessly, but Bob lived forgiven. The same is true of you. So you can live in peace. Like Bob lived in peace.

Remember the promise at the beginning of the sermon? The preacher has already made good on his commitment about St. Simeon. Now he reminds his hearers of his promise to introduce them to the second, lesser-known saint. Rhetorically speaking, this is a smart move. It brings coherence to the sermon and calls to mind what the preacher is trying to accomplish in the first place. It also engages them at a time when some of them may have begun to drift. One of my homiletics professors gave wise counsel about the use of particularly engaging stories. Rather than using them up front, he suggested saving them two-thirds of the way through the sermon to bring back those whose minds may have begun to wander.

But this is much more than a rhetorical move. More importantly, Keseman's introduction to St. Robert helps the hearers transition from the text and the lit-

urgy to daily life. He does this by raising the topic of vocation. In fact, he explores a Christian's vocation in two specific ways. First, he names a vocation that is rarely mentioned in sermons. Rig drivers don't usually make the short list when preachers rattle off familiar vocations. This part of the sermon reminded me of a plenary session at the 2022 LCMS Youth Gathering that highlighted the God-given work of the "orange-cone guy." Through construction workers, and through rig drivers, God provides for and protects a functioning economy. Preachers would do well to be intentional about naming more concretely the many various vocations of their hearers. Second, Keseman points out that St. Robert has another vocation in addition to rig driver. Like all Christians, Bob was called to bear witness to the resurrection and proclaim the promises of God in Christ to their neighbor. ("Bob also used driving as an opportunity to proclaim Jesus.") By sharing the story of St. Robert and his vocation as Christian witness, Keseman invites his hearers to imagine their own opportunities to proclaim the praises of him who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light.

And then died in peace. On July 23, 1995. I think it was two weeks to the day after Bob told my sister-in-law Barbara that he was in no hurry to die, but that he was at peace when the Lord chose to take him. Bob came to the Divine Service that day. Bob's ears heard God's promises. Bob's mouth tasted the body and blood of his Savior. After Bible class, Bob and his wife JoAnn walked out to the parking lot. Unbeknownst to most of us, Bob collapsed. He made it home. But he did not survive a heart attack later that afternoon. Still, death did not end Bob's life. Death does not end your life either, dear baptized believers in Jesus.

My favorite Bob story happened on Easter morning. As people stopped in the circle drive in front of our church to drop off passengers, Bob opened the passenger door of each car, leaned inside, and said in a heartbroken voice, "Did you hear what happened?" And the occupants of the car invariably responded, "No, what?" And Bob replied, "Christ is risen!" You know what the people in the car said: "He is risen indeed. Alleluia."

That's why Bob could die with peace. Because Bob knew his Savior was not dead in the tomb. So Bob would not be abandoned to the grave. Today Bob's soul is with his Savior. Bob's body awaits the resurrection of all flesh. You have the same promise. You, too, can die with peace.

Jeff Gibbs would appreciate this part of the sermon. In his plea for preaching that proclaims resurrection and return of Jesus, Gibbs laments his personal experience of hearing many sermons that emphasize the suffering and death of Jesus without mentioning Easter. Like Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, Gibbs reminds us, "In Easter and in other times as well, we are called to testify to the significance of Jesus's resurrection for him, for ourselves, and for all creation . . ."[7] Keseman has taken Gibbs's encour-

agement to heart, and he does it in a way that is personal for his hearers. Earlier in the sermon he mentioned that none of us knows the day of our death. It might be much sooner than we expect. (It might be before you finish reading this Anatomy!) But we can live and *die* with peace because Jesus has risen from the dead. He has promised that we will rise on that last and great day of resurrection. Notice again how Keseman proclaims the Gospel promise directly to his hearers: "Death does not end your life either, dear baptized believers in Jesus. Bob's body awaits the resurrection of all flesh. You have the same promise. You, too, can die with peace."

> *I'd like you to do three things during the remainder of this service. First, notice how many times Simeon's peace gets imbedded in the communion liturgy. Dr. Burreson will say to you, "The peace of the Lord be with you always." We will sing, "O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, grant us Thy peace." You will hear, "Depart in peace." We will repeat Simeon's song about leaving with peace. We will pray that our Lord give us pardon and peace in this sacrament. And Dr. Burreson will speak the Lord's benediction on us: "The Lord bless you and keep you and give you peace."*
>
> *In addition to listening for peace, give extra attention to the Lord's Supper today. The Christ child held by Simeon became the Christ adult who redeemed you at the cross. And in the Supper, that Christ comes down to you. That Christ gives you his forgiveness for all the sin that would otherwise rob you of peace. That Jesus gives you his strength, so you can live in peace as you do your daily vocations. That Jesus puts his living body into your dying body, so that when the time comes, you can die with peace.*
>
> *Third, along with noticing peace in the liturgy and giving extra attention to Communion, repeat Simeon's words with gusto today. Sing "Mine eyes have seen Thy salvation," knowing that in the Lord's Supper your eyes have seen Jesus and your mouth has received Jesus. Sing, "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace," knowing that you are departing this chapel with his salvation in you. You can live with peace. And, when it is time, you can die with peace. Like St. Simeon. And St. Robert.*

In Article XX of the Augsburg Confession, Melanchthon unpacks the relationship between faith and good works. Specifically, he insists that the Lutheran preachers do not shy away from exhorting their hearers toward faithful Christian living. He writes, "This teaching concerning faith is not to be censured for prohibiting good works. On the contrary, it should be praised for teaching the performance of good works and for offering help as to how they may be done."[8] Sometimes a preacher will help the hearers do good works for the sake of their neighbors. Keseman pointed in this direction earlier in the sermon when he spoke about St. Robert's vocation as

a rig driver. But other times the preacher will help the hearers do good works that benefit their own lives of faith. He does this in three ways. First, he encourages them to notice how deeply the promise of peace is embedded in the rest of the worship service. Second, he instructs them to imagine their reception of the Lord's Supper as a preparation for their own death. Third, he exhorts them to sing with gusto the familiar words of the *Nunc Dimittis*. This threefold goal is clear, tangible, and attainable.

It is here that I might have considered a fourth goal for this sermon. In "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods," Luther emphasized the frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper as a means by which the community grows together. At the table they learn to share one another's burdens and find strength in the fellowship of believers.[9] To use Keseman's language from this sermon, he might have emphasized that we live and die in peace *together* as we learn to share ourselves with one another through mutual reception of Christ's gifts in this meal. In a day and age when individualism distorts so much of the Christian life, this might have been a way to highlight the communal aspect of our faith and life together.

As the sermon comes to a close, the preacher recalls what he set out to accomplish in the introduction. Anticipating the *Nunc Dimittis* that has already begun ringing in their ears, he sends them with a gracious invitation to live and die in peace. In this way, he encourages them to imagine themselves alongside Saint Simeon, Saint Robert, and all the saints that have heard and believed the promises of God in Christ.

Like those who heard him preach this sermon, neither you (the reader) nor I (the writer of this Anatomy of a Sermon) know when we will die. But we can die and live in peace, for we have seen the salvation of Jesus through the ministry of faithful preachers like Pastor Bruce Keseman.

Endnotes

1 Henry Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 186.

2 Frank Thomas discusses the importance of preachers speaking authentically in a chapter called, "Keepin' It Real: The Validity of the Existentially Authentic Performance" in his *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 111–133.

3 Francis Rossow, "Unintentional Gospel Omissions in Our Preaching." Concordia Pulpit Resources (1995) Vol. 5, No. 4. 2–4.

4 Luther notes that God, who is "extravagantly rich in his grace," delivers the promise of the gospel in five different means: preaching, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, absolution, and the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters (Smalcald Articles III.4). When the preacher feels compelled to list the means by which God delivers his gracious promise, he would do well to name all five.

5 In general, preachers should think twice about emphasizing baptism or the Lord's Supper when they are not explicitly mentioned in the text. Some preachers are notorious for discovering baptism in every biblical drop of water and communion in every biblical reference to bread. This often reads what is not in the text and obscures details that *are*.

6 Effective preachers consider both the *synchronic* liturgical context (what is happening around the sermon during that worship service) as well as the *diachronic* liturgical context (what is happening in previous and subsequent weeks during worship). The so-called New Homiletic, which is not as new as it used to be, did well to emphasize the experience of the hearers. This includes their *liturgical* experience.

7 Jeffrey Gibbs, "Filling in the Blanks on 'Witness': God Raised Jesus from the Dead," in *Concordia Journal* 38.2 (2012): 114.

8 AC XX.35 ("Faith and Good Works"). Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 56. See also Ap IV.136 ("Justification"): "We openly confess, therefore, that the keeping of the law must begin in us and then increase more and more. And we include both simultaneously, namely, the inner spiritual impulses and the outward good works. Therefore the opponents' claims are false when they charge that our people do not teach about good works since our people not only require them but also show how they can be done."

9 LW 35:45–73.

Reviews

VOCATION: The Setting for Human Flourishing. *By Michael Berg. 1517 Publishing, 2021. Paper. 127 pages. $12.95.*

Books on vocation are a booming business. It seems we Westerners need meaning in our jobs, our relationships, and even our leisure, and authors Christian, "spiritual," and even non-religious invoke "vocation" to help us find it. So often "vocation" means an as-yet unfilled role which, once discerned and embraced, will serve as the missing link between work and meaning. The ingredients are (mostly) right, but the recipe too often is not.

Enter Michael Berg's Vocation. Berg articulates the doctrine of *vocation* in its classically Lutheran form: the justified-in-Christ, no longer seeking to justify themselves, are free to love their neighbors in their existing vocations. Vocation is present-tense and other-directed. This re-orientation opens the door to finding meaning where God means it to be found: in the extraordinary ways he uses our ordinary labor to care for those he places in our lives.

Berg examines the doctrine of vocation through three lenses: as the setting for God's work, for spiritual warfare, and for human flourishing (chapters 2, 3, and 4 respectively). In each chapter he grounds his account in the doctrine of justification. He draws on recent theological work on human self-justification, the hiddenness of God, and the theology of the cross à la Bayer, Forde, Kolb, et al. (although he does not mention them). He observes that our vocations are the stuff of greatness—not our own greatness, but God's greatness in and through us. "If we would only stop trying to make a name for ourselves and look around, we would see great and glorious tasks laid at our feet. They would just appear differently. They would look like crosses" (17).

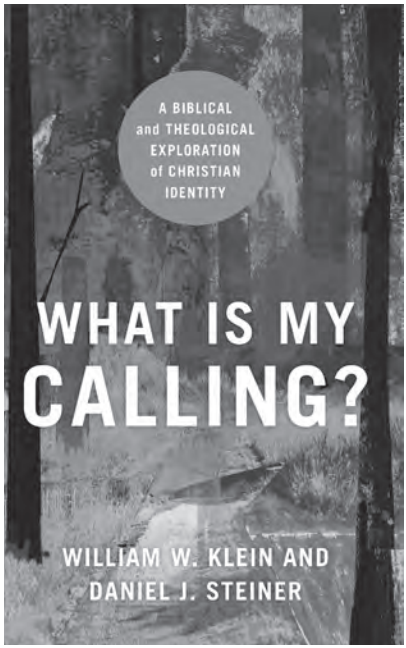
The first two lenses are familiar from Wingren and Veith. The chapter on flourishing plows new ground. Berg argues that humans come to enjoy what Aristotle calls *eudaimonia* and what the Old Testament calls *shalom* in the context of our vocations, because in vocation we find prosperity, security, freedom, and purpose. This link between vocation and flourishing is important and needs more theological reflection.

Unfortunately, Berg's account relies too heavily on the "self-esteem" (102) or "pride" (98) we experience by doing a job well (even a job like cleaning toilets). In the opinion of this reviewer, the language of self-esteem and pride remains too individualistic and self-directed. A better link between vocation and flourishing would be servanthood. If Jesus is the perfect human, then it is in his taking on the form of a servant to redeem us that true, flourishing humanity is most fully displayed in this world. Likewise, we humans flourish most when we, justified through faith and moved by the Spirit, trust the Father and give ourselves into serving others as Jesus served us.

Despite this and a few other minor complaints, I heartily recommend the book. It is written for a lay audience, and yet it is theologically rich. The writing is lively and evocative. Most importantly, it gets the recipe for vocation right, and so it serves up a nourishing intellectual and spiritual meal.

David W. Loy
Concordia University Irvine
Irvine, California

WHAT IS MY CALLING? A Biblical and Theological Exploration of Christian Identity. *By William W. Klein and Daniel J. Steiner. Baker Academic, 2022. Paper. 208 pages. $21.99.*



Having a job is not enough these days. Everyone needs a calling—a unique, individual life project designed by God. At least, so say the bushels of books on Christian calling published in the past few decades. Inspiring, this talk of calling, but is it scriptural?

Klein and Steiner answer in the negative. Their book aims to show where this conception of calling came from, the damage it does, and what Scripture says about the subject. Chapter 1 helpfully analyzes and criticizes the way "call" and "calling" are used in popular Christian literature. Chapter 2 sketches the use of "call" and "calling" in Christian history. Chapter 3 presents the biblical data for the "call" word group and related word groups such as "choose" and "will" (as in God's will). Chapters 4–6 synthesize the results into a *klesiology*—a theology of calling (122). Klein and Steiner conclude that (1) Scripture says that God "called" only a few specific figures, and their calls

are not normative for all Christians; (2) Scripture nowhere suggests that God calls every individual into a specific job or ministry position; (3) our call is first and foremost corporate—Christians (plural) are called into the body of Christ; (4) this call gives us a new identity in Christ; (5) we are to live out this call in every circumstance of life; and (6) the Scripture does not teach that there is an internal sense of calling which justifies taking on or leaving a ministry role apart from the consent and advice of the congregation.

The book is a beneficial antidote to popular literature on calling. However, it suffers from three flaws. The first is a significant misrepresentation of Luther—attributing to him a position introduced by Puritan authors, that "vocation" refers to the occupation into which God has called a person, and that one should therefore not try to change occupations. Unfortunately, this misrepresentation is not confined to the historical sketch; Klein and Steiner use it as a crutch for their presentation and a foil for their position in later chapters. In a book so careful to read Scripture closely, the failure to read Luther closely is disappointing.

Second, and relatedly, Klein and Steiner conflate the doctrine of vocation with contemporary talk of discerning one's calling. This is evident from the word groups they examine in chapter 3—"call," "choose," "will." The point of the Reformation-era doctrine of vocation was not to help people discern God's call for their lives. It was to show Christians that we live out our identities as followers of Christ in our current, concrete circumstances, not through invented supererogatory works. Acknowledging this distinction might have made the authors more charitable to Luther.

A final weakness is a lack of conceptual clarity about the meanings of "call." The data presented in chapters 2 and 3 suggest that "call" has at least three meanings in Scripture and the early church: summoning, labeling (others call one a Christian), and changing one's status (Christ's call makes one Christian). Presenting the linguistic data along these lines would have given more clarity to Klein and Steiner's account. Thankfully, their conclusions reflect this conceptual schema: having called (summoned) us, Christ now calls us (changes our status into) his own, and we ought to live so others call (label) us his as well.

Klein and Steiner reach conclusions generally amenable to Lutherans, even if they use language different than ours. They describe Christian freedom in our vocations. They describe the importance of what we term an "external call" for taking up a churchly office (although they eschew the word "call" in this case). They tacitly distinguish "internal" from "external" and "direct" from "indirect calls." Because of its flaws, this is not a book I would hand to a Lutheran layperson. However, it will be helpful for pastors and scholars studying "calling" and vocation.

David W. Loy
Concordia University Irvine
Irvine, California

34TH ANNUAL THEOLOGICAL SYMPOSIUM

TECHNOLOGY AND THE CHURCH

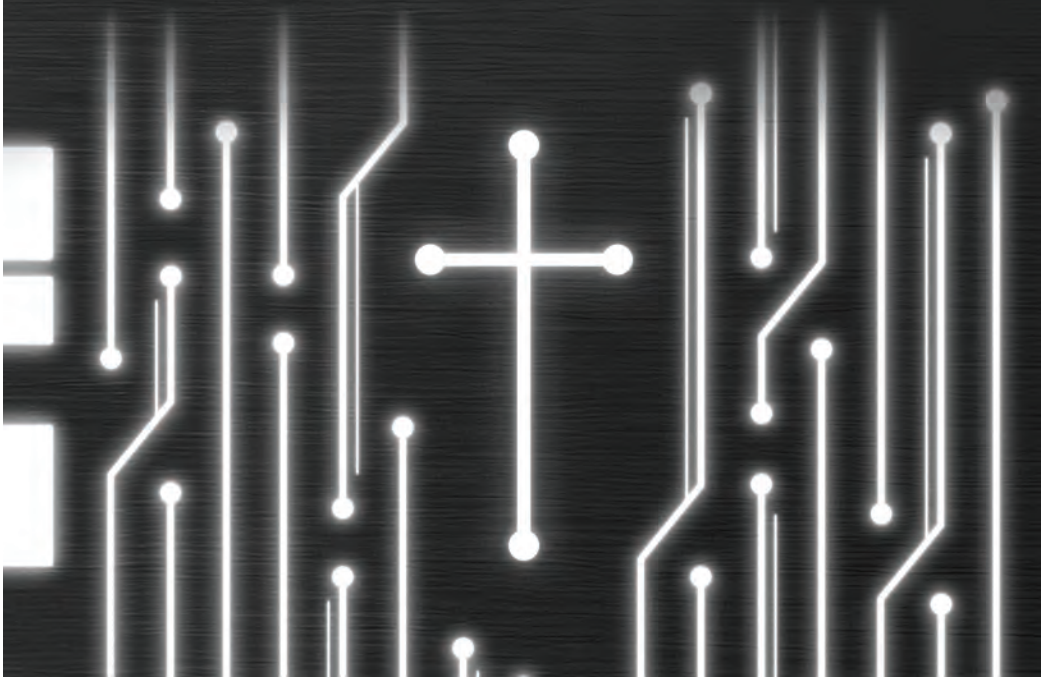
PROMISE AND PERIL

SEPT. 17–18, 2024

Concordia Seminary
ST. LOUIS

REGISTRATION COST: **$175**
REGISTRATION DEADLINE: **SEPT. 4, 2024**
REGISTER: **CSL.EDU/SYMPOSIUM**

QUESTIONS? CONTACT CONTINUING EDUCATION AT **CE@CSL.EDU** OR **314-505-7286.**



Know someone considering full-time church work?

Concordia Seminary's visitation opportunities give future church workers valuable information about formation for pastoral and diaconal ministry. There is something for everyone — including events for prospective students who are in high school or college or those who are considering ministry as a second career.

1 Vocatio: High School

A week-long visitation event held in the summer for high school men and women.

2 Vocatio: Retreat

A three-day retreat held in the spring and fall for college students and second-career men and women.

3 Personal Visit

To schedule a customized personal visit, contact Enrollment at 800-822-9545 or admit@csl.edu.

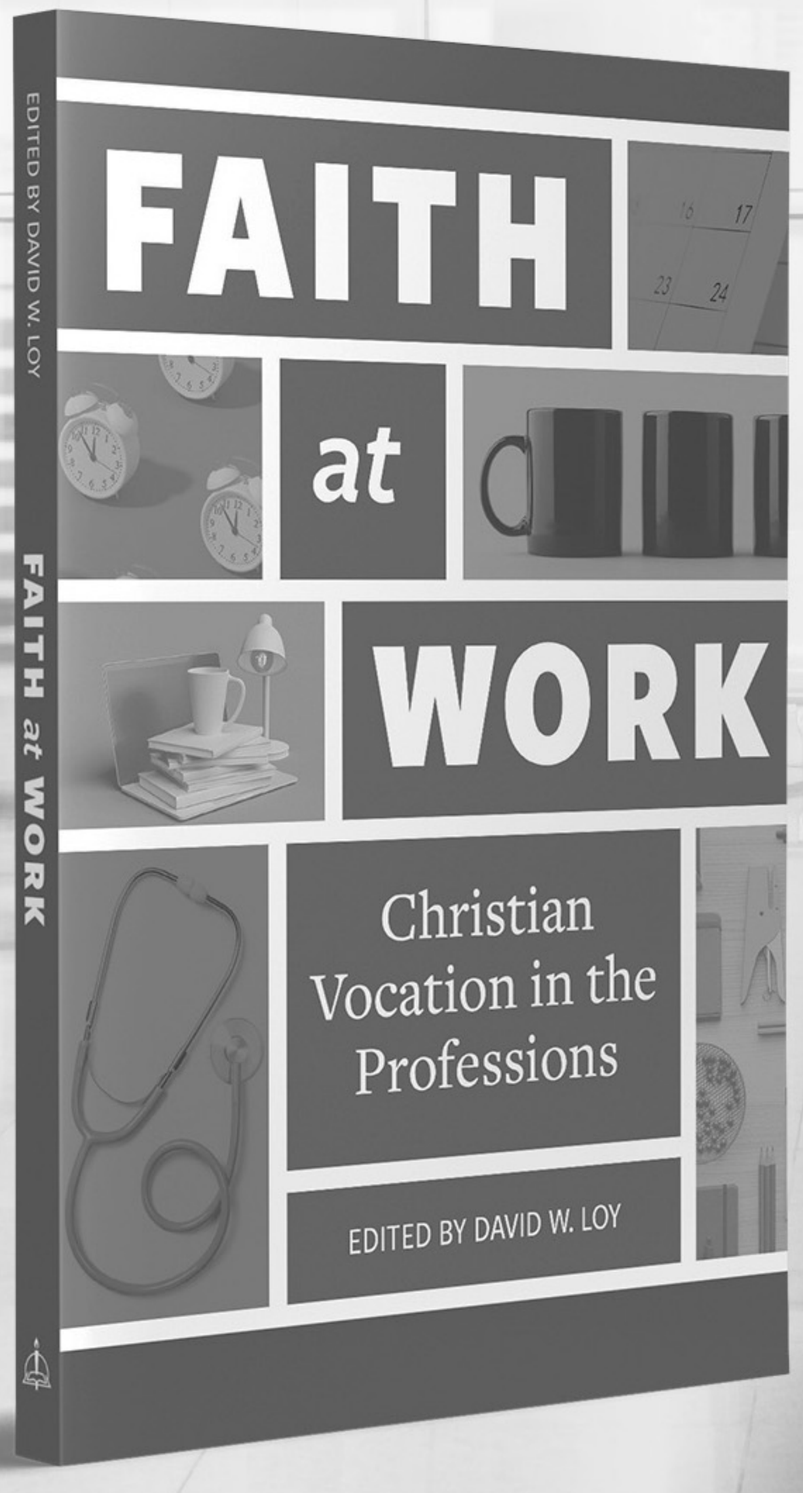
800-822-9545
CSL.EDU/ADMISSIONS

Concordia Seminary
ST. LOUIS

EXPLORE WORK FROM A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE.

This collection of fifteen essays addresses theological perspectives on work in general and in specific professions, such as counseling, nursing, business, teaching, and law.

"*Faith at Work* will help professionals, pastors, and professors reconsider the roots, motivations, and orientations of work and every vocation in light of the Christian narrative." —*Scott Ashmon, PhD, MDiv, senior vice president and provost, Concordia University Irvine*



Learn more at
cph.org

1.800.325.3040

Concordia Seminary
801 Seminary Place
St. Louis, MO 63105