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Editor's Note

The plan

With the *Concordia Journal*, we generally follow a plan in which certain themes or topics are addressed, either in single issues or short series. These themes may be aligned with our teaching here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, or with historic Lutheran anniversaries, or other pertinent and timely topics that we feel need to be addressed. In future we will continue with this kind of approach as a general plan, but with a bit of a twist; we will bring together an issue every so often which is not themed as such, but which showcases the theological research of our faculty.

This plan was already under discussion as a future possibility when the Fall 2026 issue was being constructed some months ago, still along our more usual thematic lines. But as sometimes can happen, articles that had been planned did not eventuate, and we needed to reconsider where to go. It was a great opportunity to put together our first research-showcase issue, featuring some of the investigative theological work currently being undertaken here.

This Issue's Articles

Our first piece, by Kent Bureson and Rhoda Schuler, "A House of Catechesis and Prayer for All Nations: Formation through a Contextualized Catechumenate," is an excellent example of how Lutheran scholarship needs to integrate issues of culture and ethnicity in its discourse on the ministry of the church—with Christ and his loving Lordship over all peoples at the center. The authors brought together their own prior published work with historic experiences of multiethnic ministry, using fresh reflection on Scripture as the hinge between the two. This is a comprehensive piece, in which careful distinctions and theological boundaries for multiethnic ministry are skillfully navigated.

Next is Jason Lane's piece, "Sacred Emblematics and Biblical Hermeneutics in the Lutheran Church." This is a brief but penetrating initial exploration of the largely forgotten emblematics tradition among Lutherans. His research shows the parallels and contrasts between the historic emblematic methods of using images in the church's worship, preaching and teaching and those in common use today among Lutherans, which are often less biblically integrated and sophisticated. The article opens up a potentially rich new discussion on how we as Lutherans could engage more deeply with image, art, architecture, and preaching.

Lastly, “The Stories (Hidden) in the Story of God: Preaching as Midrash” is Travis Scholl’s thought-provoking and insightful piece on midrash as a form of homiletical meditation that explores new ground while tracing ancient steps. He studies the Jewish rabbinic form of midrash as a style of deep textual meditation and explores its possibilities as a discipline for Christian preachers as they work closely on their sermon texts. I hope you appreciate the strong theological-and-practical approach Scholl takes to this topic.

Conclusion

Teaching and research go together in education; the two activities feed and enhance one another. This is especially true for theologians. As we search the Scriptures, the Spirit of God searches us, and sets us on new pathways of learning and service, even as He draws us back into the ancient pages of the biblical text.

I hope you enjoy and are enriched by the three research pieces showcased here and are stimulated by them to explore deeper and further yourself.

Stephen Pietsch
Dean of Theological Research and Publications

Note: In the original publication of the article “Do Lutherans Believe in Sola Scriptura? Luther and Melancthon’s Interpretation of Nicaea and its Relevance for the Church Today” by Jason Lane in the Summer 2026 (52, no. 3) issue of the *Concordia Journal* the endnotes were inadvertently omitted. The online version of the article has been updated and can be found at concordiatheology.org. We regret the omission.

Statement from the Faculty of Concordia Seminary

At its last meeting, the faculty of Concordia Seminary voted unanimously to publish this statement in *Concordia Journal* and on *concordiatheology.org*.

In recent months, our colleague Rev. Dr. James Voelz has been subjected to criticism, online and in print, criticism we view as inaccurate, uncharitable, and unhelpful. In particular, Dr. Voelz has been falsely characterized as undermining confidence in the authority and complete truthfulness of the divine Word. Therefore, the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, wishes to publicly declare our support of and appreciation for Dr. Voelz and for his long record of biblically and confessionally faithful teaching and writing. We give thanks to God for the wisdom He has revealed to us through Jim and for what Jim has taught about faithful and humble biblical interpretation in his more than fifty years of service to our church.

In Memoriam

Robert Louis Wilken (1936–2026)

I received the news that Robert Louis Wilken had died at the age of 89 this past June 6 while I was at a meeting with the group Evangelicals and Catholics Together. Robert had been a part of this group for many years and was a best friend and Concordia Seminary classmate of one of its founding members, Richard John Neuhaus.

Robert was the William R. Kenan Professor of the History of Christianity at the University of Virginia and general editor of *The Church's Bible* (Eerdmans), a patristic commentary on selected books of the Old and New Testaments. He was a prolific writer with a number of influential texts on different topics in the field of patristics: *Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (Yale, 1984, 2nd ed. 2013), *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (Yale, 2003), and *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (Yale, 2013) among many others.

One of his earliest writings was *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind: A Study of Cyril of Alexandria's Exegesis and Theology* (Yale University Press, 1971). Robert was a first-rate translator and scholar of Cyril of Alexandria, but he was of course familiar with all the early Christian writers and was a mentor to many patristic scholars who now occupy key positions at major universities, some of whom are LCMS. He was brought up in an LCMS home in New Orleans where he often expressed the desire to become a pastor. When he got older, he was schooled in our Lutheran gymnasium tradition, having graduated from Concordia College in Austin, TX and then on to seminary here at Concordia in St. Louis where he received his BA (1957) and Bachelor of Divinity (1960), having studied under Arthur Carl Piepkorn. He then went on to earn an MA (1961) and PhD (1963) at the University of Chicago.

I was surprised to learn that he had never been back on our campus since his graduation back in 1960. I asked him why. He told me had never been invited. So, I invited him. He spoke on the topic of the History of Exegesis. The President's Room in that fall of 2015 was packed to overflowing as he made the case for allegory before an initially (and sometimes still) skeptical audience. The lecture is on our CSL Scholar page. Robert then agreed to team-teach a course with me on the History of Exegesis for our PhD students in that program. Later he would agree to be on the committee for one last PhD student in the History of Exegesis here at Concordia: my son Luke. Luke said he was both honored and intimidated. Good, I told him. That's how it is supposed to be—and Robert put him through his paces at the hearing.

Professor Wilken told me he had many fond memories of our campus and was delighted to be back and attend daily chapel. He was very much shaped by his life in the church. He and my mentor Tom Oden initially collaborated on a Bible commentary series on the church fathers, but parted ways over how their vision should be realized. But both were committed to the idea that it is the church's Bible, not the academy's Bible. Both were also committed to a deep appreciation of the church's catholicity.

Robert was a gentleman, a scholar, a jazz enthusiast, a baker (he gave me one of his recipes for his favorite bread he used to make) and a man of prayer who appreciated his Lutheran roots even when he converted to Catholicism. Most of all, he was a friend who exhibited a deep and abiding faith in his Lord and a love for his family and church until the end. He will be missed. Requiescat in pace.

Joel Elowsky

Articles

A House of Catechesis and Prayer for All Nations Formation through a Contextualized Catechumenate

Kent Burreson and Rhoda Schuler



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liturgical studies from the University of Notre Dame, he teaches courses in systematic theology and liturgy.



Rhoda Schuler is a rostered LCMS deaconess and emerita professor of theology at Concordia University, St. Paul, MN. She is the co-author (with Kent Burreson)

of *Journey to Jesus: Faith Formation into Christ and Community*. For additional information on her research interests, see rhodaschuler.com.

Asked to serve as the plenary speakers for the 2025 Multiethnic Symposium on the topic of catechesis, we drew from scholarly research, Scripture, and personal experiences to illustrate our themes and to make a case for greater cultural competency among church leaders. First, we used research from our book, *Journey to Jesus: Faith Formation into Christ and Community*, particularly the interviews and observations from Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Bronx, New York, a multiethnic congregation in a diverse community.¹ Second, examples and exhortations from the New Testament inform our hearts and minds on this topic. Third, Schuler's experiences from the 1980s as a member of an African American

LCMS congregation, St. Michael's Lutheran Church in Kinloch, Missouri, provide some of the examples of inculturation,² while Burreson's travel experiences among churches in Asia and in particular, a workshop on contextualization of worship from the perspective of an Asian church leader, provide insights into the issues. Finally, in summer 2024 we were invited to serve as consultants at Salem Lutheran Church in

Springdale, Arkansas, a bilingual congregation (English and Spanish). The pastors, Adam Gless and Brandon Martin (who is bilingual), were seeking ways to strengthen their adult faith formation process and to explore avenues for integrating the two language groups into a more unified faith community. Our source material from interviews with the people of Salem provides important examples of the complexity and opportunities for bilingual congregations.

Dr. Ely Prieto, Associate Professor of Practical Theology and Associate Dean for Urban and Cross-Cultural Ministry at Concordia Seminary, said in his opening remarks at the 2025 symposium, “As we assemble today, we live into the eschatological promise of Revelation 7:9–10, catching a foretaste of that heavenly vision where a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language stands before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white and united in praise.” Because of our graduate degrees in liturgy, the promise of Revelation 7 resonates with both of us; as Arthur Just writes, “our liturgy is . . . eschatological.”³ As the description of the symposium states, the Great Commission to baptize and teach “also involves ongoing catechesis through which the church nurtures disciples who can, in turn, make more disciples.” And we, having studied worship and liturgy, hold an expansive view of “catechesis.” Ours is a view that extends beyond a classroom space to include the worshipping life of a congregation as a primary means by which seekers are made disciples of Jesus and by which the faith of new and lifelong disciples is nurtured and deepened. Thus, it was natural for us to consult the “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture,” prepared by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in 1996, for concepts and language that might inform our address.

The Nairobi Statement, developed by a LWF study team whose members represented five continents, met in Cartigny, Switzerland (1993) and Hong Kong (1994), and conducted regional research in 1994–1995. The third consultation, held in January 1996 in Nairobi, Kenya, produced the “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities.” This document is structured around four descriptors for worship and culture: worship as transcultural, contextual, countercultural, and cross-cultural. Each descriptor of worship and culture is first grounded in statements about Jesus Christ using the same categories: Christ is transcultural, contextual, countercultural, and cross-cultural.⁴ These categories serve as the framework for this article, with Christ as transcultural bookending the whole.

Christ as Transcultural

Transcultural truly means what it says about the gospel and the church. Transcultural realities are the same for everyone, everywhere. They are beyond culture. This is certainly true for the church. As the Nairobi statement says, “The resurrected Christ whom we worship, and through whom by the power of the Holy Spirit we know the grace of the Triune God, transcends and indeed is beyond all cultures.”⁵ In

his resurrection, Jesus re-establishes God's reign within his creation. All creation, including all its cultures, is renewed in the risen Lord alone. In him God's creative work is brought to completion in the renewal of all things. The risen Christ thus bears in himself those things that cross cultures, and that are beyond cultures. As Paul says in Colossians,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (1:15–20 ESV)

Because God is the creator and renewer of all things, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit transcend culture and incorporate all cultures into the rule and reign of God in Christ. When our congregational life, our worship, and our catechumenal rituals and formation witness to practices that cross cultures, we give witness to the unity of the church under its head, Christ Jesus, the risen Lord.

I (Kent) became profoundly aware of this transcultural nature of the church's life when I went to a workshop led by It-o Loh. While technically this is an example of re-contextualization in Asia, nonetheless it points to the fact that the worship of the church is only truly transcultural to the degree that it is fully contextual. In other words, we cannot embrace the transcultural realities apart from knowing what is unique contextually to the diverse expressions of the church's life. It-o Loh, from Taiwan, is considered the foremost Christian musician and ethnomusicologist in the modern era from Asia. He is the editor of the global Asian hymnal, *Sound the Bamboo*.⁶ At his workshop he lamented the fact that throughout Asia the Christian church, no matter what denomination, has adopted Christianity in predominantly Western cultural forms. When I went to Korea and to an Asian Lutheran church I heard songs like Amazing Grace, sung in English even, not songs arising from the Asian context and with Asian instruments. Loh essentially commissioned the Westerners at his workshop to be missionaries of Asian cultural forms of music and instrumentation to Asians. He desired us to teach our Asian brothers and sisters how to sing and make music in ways appropriate to the Asian context. By owning the Asian musical tradition as Westerners, and seeking to form Asian Christians in it, we were expressing the transcultural nature of music. The various contextualized cultures of the church's life point to the one who unifies and transcends them all: The Word who created them and who in his resurrection is redeeming them.

Unity within the body of Christ is the basis for the recognition of the transcultural expression of the church's life. We share things that transcend cultures because we are one body in Christ. As Paul says in Ephesians:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (4:1–6 ESV)

We can certainly debate what elements of the church's life, worship, and catechesis are transcultural, but note in this passage what Paul isolates as transcultural and thus unifying: We share in common one Body, one Spirit, one Hope, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father. At minimum, these are realities that truly transcend all the diverse cultural manifestations of the church's life. All these things are given to us in the risen Christ, and we then contextualize them within the cultures in which we live, move, and have our being.

Christ as Contextual

“Jesus Christ whom we worship was born into a specific culture of the world.”⁷ Lest we forget, Jesus was a Jewish male, born at a time when his ethnic group was living under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire in the first century AD. He spoke Aramaic, the language of first-century Jewish people, and, as we learn from the Gospel writers, he practiced the Jewish faith. Luke reports that Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day and that his family traveled to Jerusalem to offer the sacrifices of thanksgiving for his birth and for the purification of his mother Mary in the temple (Lk 2:21–40), where they “finished everything required by the law of the Lord” (Lk 2:39 NRSV). The Synoptic Gospels record Jesus going to synagogue on the Sabbath (Mt 13:53–58; Mk 6:1–6; Lk 4:14–30), a common Jewish practice of the time. All four Gospels record Jesus journeying to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, the great Jewish feast of liberation from slavery. And when he arrived in the holy city of Jerusalem, he immediately went to the temple, the most holy place for Jews (Mt 21:12–17; Mk 11:15–19; Lk 19:45–48; Jn 2:13–22). Today, one can visit an archaeological park in Jerusalem and see the very steps that he, his disciples, and all the first-century Jewish pilgrims who came to Jerusalem climbed to enter the temple complex. All these New Testament accounts serve to remind us that the Word “became flesh” in a particular time and place (Jn 1:14); he was not a “Superman” who came from a different planet, a different culture. Because God took on our humanity and “pitched his tent”

(σκηνίω), that is, lived among these particular people in first-century Palestine, we believe and confess that God is made known to humanity through human culture.

Worship and Catechesis as Contextual

Contextualization, from the perspective of the mission of the church, is “at its essence . . . about bridging the gap between the unchanging message of the Gospel and the ever-shifting contexts of culture and geography.”⁸ Liturgical scholarship uses both the terms contextualization and inculturation to describe how the church’s worship becomes meaningful in a particular cultural context. Using the latter term, Roman Catholic liturgical theologian Anscar Chupungco writes,

The immediate aim of inculturation is to create a form of worship that is culturally suited to the local assembly, which should be able to claim it as its very own. . . . Inculturation properly understood and rightly executed will lead the assembly to a profound appreciation of Christ’s mystery made present in the liturgy . . . [it] aims to deepen the spiritual life of the assembly through a fuller experience of Christ, who is revealed in the people’s language, rites, arts, and symbols.⁹

Contextualization of the gospel occurred early in the history of Christianity; the first step was language. St. Paul and the Gospel writers wrote in Greek—not Aramaic, the language of Jesus and his disciples. Paul took contextualization to the next step. He was bicultural, raised as a faithful first-century Jew, yet his family resided in the Greco-Roman city of Tarsus; he was bilingual, speaking, reading, and writing in Aramaic and Greek. As a young adult he studied in Jerusalem with the famous Jewish Rabbi, Gamaliel. He could, as African Americans say, code switch—act and speak in both cultures with ease. His call, of course, to bring the gospel to gentiles, was not without bumps and conflicts, which is a good reminder to us as we consider contextualization of the gospel message today.

Two examples from Acts illustrate the challenges of doing contextualization. Consider the account of Cornelius, the God-fearing Roman centurion in Acts 10; Peter had to see that vision of unclean animals *three times* before taking delivery of God’s message and saying to Cornelius and his household: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34 NRSV). Second, we have the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15. Only after a long debate, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, were the early Jewish Christian leaders convinced that circumcision and keeping Jewish dietary laws were *not* necessary for followers of Jesus. From Paul’s letters we know much about the gentile Christian community at Corinth and the challenges of contextualization from the gentile point of view. In the words of one New Testament

scholar about the gentile Christians at Corinth, “Paul’s attempts to persuade them to see and do things [in a new] way reveals just how difficult it was for people rooted in the Hellenistic culture of a large metropolis such as Corinth to assimilate Paul’s gospel of Christ and its implications for personal and community life . . .”¹⁰

Unlike Peter and Paul in the first century, those of us who live in the dominant culture (like we, the authors, do as white, middle-class citizens of the US) are so immersed in our own culture that often we are unaware that norms and practices so deeply embedded in us are, in fact, specific to our context, our world, and that these norms and practices are not universal across cultures. With that in mind, we explore the challenges of contextualization in worship and catechesis with examples from art, language, and perceptions of time.

Contextualization and Art

According to one source, “Art . . . at its most profound level, . . . takes us from the everyday to a place of introspection and contemplation, to see the bigger picture of the human condition.”¹¹ To explore the diversity of humanity, we will contemplate three depictions of Jesus (opposite page). First, a Tiffany window of Jesus from the early twentieth century—a very white, northern European-looking man—very much like the people in the pews of the church in Orange, New Jersey (where this window was located) and looking like most folks in the LCMS still today. This is the image we had of Jesus—via stained glass windows, Sunday School and devotional materials, children’s Bibles, bulletin covers, and religious art in our homes—as we were growing up. Our second depiction of Jesus is a sixth-century icon from St. Catherine Monastery at the foot of Mt. Sinai.¹² Here we see a Middle Eastern man with dark hair, brown eyes, and a dark complexion, which is a far more accurate image of the Jesus who walked this earth in the first century than the Tiffany window. But more importantly, Christians of the sixth century to those of the present day from this part of the world could and do gaze upon this icon and see the image of their own humanity in his face.

Finally, we contemplate a photo of the processional cross from Redeemer Lutheran Church, in the Bronx, an African Jesus. In the 1980s, when I was a minority white member of St. Michael Lutheran Church in the city of Kinloch in north St. Louis County, my congregation had the same processional cross. To connect fully with Christ’s humanity, we need to see depictions of a Jesus who looks like us. Just as the Jesus of the Tiffany window and Christian art that we (Kent and Rhoda) encountered in our formative years connected us with the person of Jesus, for the African American people of St. Michael’s and Redeemer, this image of Jesus says, “I have pitched my tent among *you*.” If we as a church body are serious about raising up leaders from within the ethnic groups that are a growing percentage of the US population, those making decisions about artwork in our publications are called to re-imagine how Christ and Christ’s people are depicted in art.



Image upper left: Tiffany window. Designed and created in 1909 by Tiffany Studios, New York, NY, for Grace Episcopal Church (later Church of the Epiphany), Orange, NJ; under the curatorial care of Museum of the Bible, Washington DC. Photo by Rhoda Schuler, April 21, 2025.

Image upper right: Icon of Christ Pantocrator, 6th century; St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai.

Image left: Black Jesus on Cross, processional cross, Redeemer Lutheran Church, the Bronx, NY; photo courtesy of Redeemer Lutheran Church, the Bronx, NY.

Contextualization and Language

As we heard numerous times in our interviews, language is a primary barrier at Salem Lutheran. In major congregational gatherings intended to bring the two language groups together, as one Anglo couple we interviewed said, “there’s a lot of nodding and smiling going on across the bingo table.” Most people we interviewed recognized the value of these gatherings while also acknowledging their limitations, which make it difficult to form deep connections across the language divide. We heard one creative idea floated by a person we interviewed relating to language. Salem has a long history of offering ESL classes; what about offering SSL classes—Spanish as a Second Language for Anglos? In addition to the benefit of learning a second language for the monolingual, it would reverse the dynamic of giver-recipient. The implicit message would be that native Spanish speakers have something to offer to the major culture in the congregation and community. As those who have traveled to non-English speaking parts of the world know, local people are often delighted to be greeted and thanked in their native tongue by English-speaking visitors. In both situations, learning a few foreign words (or taking a class in a second language) is a powerful way for one person to demonstrate the value of the other’s language and culture.

In contrast to activities done separately for English- and Spanish-speaking adults at Salem Lutheran, catechesis for children and youth combines both cultures. Because the Hispanic children have learned English in school, it is possible to combine the groups into one class, with instruction in English. Thus, community is built across the two cultural groups, and regular exposure to the other’s culture happens in the context of study and fellowship. Children and youth have the benefit of easier interaction with both of Salem’s pastors, as well.

For adult Bible classes and other instruction, Pastor Martin does all the teaching in Spanish and Pastor Gless leads most of the regular teaching in English. For now, the language differences also necessitate separate worship services. By doing so, Salem is honoring the vital importance of language as part of one’s cultural heritage. We in the LCMS—who maintained our mother tongue of German for several generations, including through World War I—ought to be at the forefront in this matter, supporting worship in the mother tongue of immigrants and refugees coming to the United States for as long as the immigrant communities deem necessary and good. By doing so, we would both honor our own history and forebears as well as honor and advocate for the immigrants and refugees among us now.

The discussion of worship as contextual in the Nairobi statement recommends “the method of creative assimilation,” that is, “adding pertinent components of local culture to the liturgical [order of service] in order to enrich its core.”¹³ We witnessed Pastor Martin doing exactly this during the prayers of the church. As in many congregations, he asked for special petitions from the gathered assembly. One father asked for prayers for his daughter’s birthday. Pastor Martin invited them into

the aisle and *laid his hand* on the daughter as he prayed. This creative assimilation of a significant component of the Divine Service, the intercessions, both honors the importance of family in Hispanic culture; at the same time, it upholds a value of the pastors at Salem—to encourage and strengthen the role of the father as spiritual head of the family.

I (Rhoda) offer a second example of creative assimilation from decades ago, when I was involved in worship planning at St. Michael's Lutheran Church. The city of Kinloch, an African American municipality, was incorporated in the mid-twentieth century because of red lining by the surrounding white communities of Ferguson and Berkeley, and the city had a high poverty rate. One Sunday we used a litany as part of the liturgy for Holy Communion that was prepared by a group of Lutheran congregations from urban Milwaukee. Forty years later I still remember Dorothea, a tall, elegant, African American woman, seeking me out after the service. She pointed to the final section read by the congregation, "As we come from crowded streets, past vacant lots, from full and empty tables, we wait to share the piece of bread and sip of wine that binds us close to you, [O Christ], and all your people in this place and everywhere."¹⁴ That section spoke to her; it described her context, Kinloch, where everyone passed by vacant lots on the way to church; and where Dorothea knew there were both "full and empty tables" within the community. From that point on, St. Michael's used that litany regularly.

Contextualization and Time

To illustrate this challenge of contextualization, we draw on a presentation by a Navajo Christian, Mark Charles, "Time Perception and Contextual Worship."¹⁵ The Western perception of time is linear. There is a starting point and an end point; time is an "ever rolling stream," as we sing. We who are steeped in Western culture think and live in this linear way; our Google calendar keeps us organized, with time organized by month, week, day, and hour. Implicit in this perception of time, according to Mark Charles, is how we Westerners "communicate honor and value." We do so, he says, by honoring "the schedule and showing up on time." We honor our boss by showing up for work on time; or our professors by showing up for class on time; or our children by picking them up after school on time. And we honor God by showing up for worship on time.

The Navajo people, however, have a circular perception of time, and so, he says, "we organize our lives . . . not by making a schedule, but by completing a task . . . the way we communicate honor and value . . . is not by getting there when something starts, but by staying until it finishes." While not in a position to make a definitive statement about Hispanic perception of time, it seems from our conversations with Pastor Martin and members at Salem, there is an affinity between the Navajo and Hispanic perception of time that is expressed in a similar pattern of behavior. Pastor

Martin put it this way: Arriving for events at the appointed time is not a strong value in the Hispanic community. But, he said, “Once people are there, they are fully engaged and will stay to the end.” We witnessed this commitment to stay to the end when we returned to Salem Lutheran to present our recommendations to them and to participate in the annual Festival of Nations. At the end of the meal (a feast of food from many cultures) and program, both Anglo and Hispanic members worked together, putting away chairs and tables as they danced to the DJ’s music.¹⁶

An interview with a Hispanic couple also confirms this value, as well as its importance in navigating the cultural differences. This couple noted that the Anglo musicians who played for the Spanish worship service often leave once their musical duties are done, which is before the end of the service. From the Anglo point of view, these dedicated folks had already attended one English service, plus Bible class. They are highly committed to the bilingual ministry at Salem by offering their musical gifts for the Spanish service. But from the Hispanic point of view, their early departure dishonored the people at worship and their Hispanic culture, which shows honor by staying to the end. Such differences require negotiation, mutual respect, dialogue, and above all, prayer. Many of those we interviewed are aware of cultural differences and are committed to maintaining and strengthening the multiethnic congregation. As one Anglo woman said, “On both sides there is a willingness to make sacrifices because of the cultural differences.” Another offered this profound insight: “There are complimentary gifts in the two cultures; if we can figure it out well, it is like a marriage: We will be stronger together.”

Christ as Countercultural

According to the Nairobi Statement, “Jesus Christ . . . calls us not to conform to the world, but to be transformed with it . . .”(Rom 12:2).¹⁷ First, we look at the Gospel of Matthew—not the closing chapter and the Great Commission, but the first chapter, the genealogy of Jesus. Its most curious feature is the mention of four women in Jesus’s lineage—not, however, the matriarchs Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah, but Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and “the wife of Uriah” (Bathsheba). Rahab, of course, was the Canaanite prostitute in Jericho who hid the Israelite spies in exchange for her safety and the safety of her parents and siblings. It is hard to know what would be more scandalous to the first-century Jewish Christian audience for which Matthew wrote: that one of Jesus’s ancestors was a prostitute or a Canaanite. And Ruth—although we today might find her to be a more “respectable” woman—is also an ethnic outsider, a Moabite, an enemy of Israel going back to the time of the Judges (chapter 3) and condemned by the prophets (Is 15; Jer 48; Zep 2:8–10). In his Gospel, written for a Jewish audience that had questions about how to relate to the gentile world, Matthew foreshadows in the genealogy that opens the Gospel what Jesus will make clear in the final chapter, to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). By including Rahab and

Ruth in Jesus's genealogy, Matthew is subtly saying this: those whom you consider to be enemies and outsiders are to be welcomed as part of the family of God, for Jesus, descended from Abraham and David, has an ancestry that extends beyond the chosen ones of Israel.

Second, consider the expansive ministry of Jesus. The healing of the Roman (a gentile) centurion's servant (Mt 8:5–13; Lk 7:1–10); the tenth of the cleansed lepers, a Samaritan, who returns and falls at Jesus's feet to thank him (Lk 17:11); the Canaanite woman who verbally spars with Jesus on behalf of her daughter, replying to his words of apparent rejection: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table" (Mt 15:27); and the Samaritan woman at the well, whose initial witness to her neighbors brought "many more" to believe that Jesus "is truly the Savior of the world" (Jn 4:39–42). By interacting with people of other cultures—against the accepted norms of first-century Judaism—Jesus models for the first-century audience of the Gospel and *for us today* an openness to the full humanity of those "not like us."

Worship and Catechesis as Countercultural

Paul writes to the church at Rome: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. *Do not be conformed to this world* but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:1–2 NRSV, emphasis added).

Two examples from Salem Lutheran illustrate this countercultural principle. We love what they are doing with youth catechesis, especially the involvement of parents, who also come on Wednesday evening for the meal, after which comes intergenerational instruction by Pastor Martin or Gless on a section of the catechism. Then the youth go off into small groups for more instruction and mentored discussion with a lay member. At the same time, the parents (divided by English and Spanish) discuss the topic with the pastors, which, the Wednesday night we were there, happened to be the sixth commandment. "This will be awkward," thought Rhoda. Wrong! These parents were eager to discuss the challenges of raising children to "fear and love God" by leading a sexually pure life. Questions they had included: How can parents encourage their daughters to dress modestly in our culture? How can parents communicate to their sons the importance of honoring the bodies of women with the prevalence of online pornography? This lively discussion on sexual purity is very countercultural and is unexpected in an LCMS congregation.

Our second example is far more *atypical* in an LCMS congregation and, in today's cultural and political climate, very prophetic. Immigration policy of the United States has been a divisive issue for decades. Even before the current administration escalated efforts to remove undocumented immigrants with disturbing

tactics by ICE agents, there were examples of anti-immigrant violence by US citizens. One incident from 2015 was particularly shameful. A Somali American woman, Asma Jama, dining in an Applebee's restaurant with her family in a suburb north of Minneapolis, was drawn into a verbal exchange with the couple in the next booth. The woman and her husband were upset when they heard Jama, who is Muslim and was wearing a hijab, speaking Swahili with her family. They told Jama to "go home" and "when you're in America you should speak English." When Jama responded that this is her home, the wife got up from her booth and smashed a beer mug into Jama's face.¹⁸ While the action of the perpetrator was extreme, her attitude was not. During this last presidential election cycle, the divide over immigration grew wider and the rhetoric uglier, making Salem Lutheran's decision over a decade ago to reach out to the immigrant community in its midst a prophetic act (even in 2025 when the symposium plenary address was written).

In our first Zoom conversation with Pastors Martin and Gless (August 2024, during the presidential campaign), they described the fear and anxiety they heard from within the Hispanic community, regardless of people's immigration status. Pastor Martin said, "Even those with citizenship feel lumped in with so-called criminals." Some were staying away from church, fearful of ICE raids. President Trump won Arkansas with 64% of the vote.¹⁹ Salem's welcoming stance toward the immigrant community is countercultural in the wider community and within its own membership. But by welcoming all—as one Hispanic woman said, "Here I feel seen"—the Anglo people of Salem *are not being conformed to this world*. And even though some of the Anglo members of Salem are not fully supportive of the Hispanic ministry, the congregation is making a powerful witness against the demonization of immigrants that is part of our current political climate. By breaking bread together—both in the fellowship hall at the annual Festival of All Nations and during bilingual worship in the sanctuary, by sharing the very body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper—the barriers erected by the rhetoric that dehumanizes others as "aliens or illegals" is broken down, and minds and hearts are transformed to see the face of Jesus in *all* people, "prov[ing] what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Worship and Catechesis as Cross-Cultural

Seeing the face of Jesus in all people is the basis for *the cross-cultural sharing of the church*. Jesus is the Savior of all people, as St. Paul writes to Timothy: "For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe" (1 Tm 4:10 ESV). Because he is the Savior of all, Christians of all races and cultures are bound to one another. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in *Life Together*, "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ . . . We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ. It

means, first, that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ.”²⁰ What we share together from our lives is always because we are bound together by faith. But that binding in faith is contextualized in specific cultures. And so, we see the face of Jesus in others in terms of the particularity of their cultural identities. As an expression of that common faith, we share our particular cultural expressions of that faith with one another. As the Nairobi Statement indicates, “The sharing . . . across cultural barriers helps enrich the whole Church and strengthen the sense of the communion of the Church.”²¹

Essential to this cross-cultural sharing are expressions of hospitality between believers across different cultural expressions of the faith. For example, C. Michael Hawn, retired worship professor at Perkins School of Theology, says of congregational greeters, “Those who prepare culturally conscious worship need greeters who reflect the diversity of the congregation in its fullness—ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic position, and marital status. Imagine a congregation that incorporates families of all kinds into its schedule of greeters.”²² Such hospitality was in evidence at Redeemer in the Bronx as the ushers, identified by their red jackets and of a host of ages and ethnic backgrounds, readily greeted and assisted everyone before, throughout, and after the service. Sharing local cultural gifts within a multiethnic congregation in this way enriches the whole church. It expresses and strengthens the congregation’s sense of fellowship and communion with one another. To sustain the distinct cultural expressions in their midst and to allow that diversity of cultural expression to strengthen their life together as a congregation is essential in multi-cultural churches. This cross-cultural sharing should be done in ways that are authentic and true to the originating culture. That means asking questions from people of the originating culture and allowing them to guide the congregation in participating in their cultural practices and experiences. Yet, that should not inhibit the effort. Sometimes one needs to take the risk and participate in another culture’s practices as best one can. In taking this risk, a congregation truly lives by faith in the grace of God in Christ and in that grace as it is known in the originating culture. Cross-cultural sharing is foundational to a congregation’s worship and catechesis.

Hawn offers two strategies (within a helpful list of ten) that can assist with developing a rich practice of cross-cultural sharing.²³ First, it entails developing committed and informed leadership. Both the pastoral and called staff of a congregation as well as its lay leaders must be committed to envisioning a congregation that “embodies a new humanity in Christ”²⁴ through its sharing of cultural practices. Hawn, in his second strategy, encourages selecting leaders who reflect the cultural diversity of the congregation and the neighborhood.²⁵ Redeemer’s leadership reflects this cultural diversity, having a pastor who is African American and Anglo and a deaconess who is of Hispanic descent. Lay leaders and participants in worship reflect the ethnic diversity of the neighborhoods surrounding Redeemer.

Salem is striving to represent this diversity in its life together as well. While both pastors are Anglo, Pastor Martin has extensive experience living in Hispanic contexts and is fluent in Spanish and various Hispanic subcultures. They have recently added a Hispanic member to their church council, something that had drifted to the wayside during COVID-19. They would like to add a staff member who is bilingual and preferably of Hispanic descent to assist Pastor Martin. All of that creates an environment in which cross-cultural exchange is expected and nurtured throughout the breadth of Salem's life.

Cross-cultural sharing within a congregation comes in many ways and through many forms. The goal of such sharing is a cross-cultural exchange that enriches the lives of all the subcultures of the congregation and that develops a greater sense of unity. Areas for cross-cultural sharing include languages, ritual, preaching, teaching, music, art, sharing of food, and leadership styles. We will focus on the following: ritual, music, and food.

Through Ritual

First, cross-cultural sharing through ritual begins with the inherited ritual practice of a particular congregation. As Hawn observes, it is best "to work creatively within normative traditional liturgical patterns in your faith heritage rather than creating new structures for worship"²⁶ (although there certainly is a place for the latter). Redeemer follows the traditional Western *ordo* of liturgy as manifest in *Lutheran Service Book*. But the way in which the parts of the service are done is an act of cultural sharing. The blessing is spoken while some in the congregation respond with hands raised up and a shout of Amen or Alleluia.

Salem follows the same strategy. The Spanish hymnal of the LCMS and its partner churches through Central and South America, *Himnario Luterano*,²⁷ serves as the foundation for their Spanish service, blending both Anglo and Spanish language music and hymnody. Pastor Martin summed up the Spanish liturgy: "In the Spanish service, the liturgy and readings are mostly in Spanish. In every service, one or two hymns are sung bilingually, and a children's message is delivered in English. During the sermon, all Scripture references are provided in both languages on a screen in the nave." Salem is also working toward a broader cross-cultural sharing across the three services. For example, incorporation of Spanish language elements and ritual, such as the creative assimilation of intercessory prayer discussed earlier, in the two English-speaking services is one way to cross-culturally share. Another possibility is to expand the frequency of services that bring the entire congregation, Hispanic and Anglo, together. Salem has a number of these seasonally each year, according to the church calendar. But one member suggested that offering more of these opportunities would develop this cross-cultural hospitality.

Through Music

Second, music is one of the easiest ways to expand cross-cultural exchange. Many Anglos are already familiar with Spanish language tunes or can learn them quickly. Spanish speakers are already familiar with the dominant Anglo musical forms. A good place to start is the list of Spanish language hymns in the LSB. Even when a Spanish language hymn cannot be sung in its entirety by the Anglo part of the congregation, they could be taught a refrain in Spanish. At Salem, one opportunity for such sharing was Reformation Sunday. On Reformation Sunday, which was also confirmation day for the youth, there was one service for the entire congregation. Yet, it manifested a missed opportunity for cross-cultural exchange. As one member noted, there were no Hispanic hymns or songs in the service. Such bilingual expression would have helped to break down any silos that existed between the Anglo and Hispanic cultures at Salem. These kinds of cross-cultural exchanges through ritual and music develop the sense that the entire congregation is unified in its faith expression, and thus in its faith.

Through Food and Feasting

Third, the sharing of foods and feasting together serve as a primary avenue for embracing cross-cultural exchange. As Hawn indicates,

One barometer of a church's health may be related to the frequency with which members share meals. In my experience many Korean and Indian congregations, for example, enjoy gathering for full meals almost every Sunday... Worship followed by a full meal offers the possibility of continuing fellowship with others and allows churchgoers to maintain ties with people from their homeland.²⁸

I (Kent) have been many times to an Antiochene Orthodox church here in St. Louis that has a meal following worship every Sunday. Gatherings around food, especially when different ethnic dishes are shared, provide a foundation for strengthening the church's communion. Redeemer's youth catechumenate on Friday nights never takes place without food that, from week to week, represents the ethnic diversity of the youth.

The Festival of Nations at Salem is a congregational feast day at the center of congregational life and mission. To this event members and former members of the congregation are invited to bring food that represents their own cultural heritage and tradition. Nearly everyone we interviewed at Salem mentioned this festival as a significant part of their life together as a Christian community. They observed that it built the opportunity for cross-cultural exchange and hospitality. Despite language barriers that prohibit a fuller exchange between Hispanic and Anglo members of the congregation, the food, music, dancing, and festivity at the Festival of Nations allows the congregation to bear witness that Christ is the Savior of all at Salem and of the entire world.

This kind of cross-cultural exchange at Salem has increased the cohesiveness and shared cultural identity of the congregation. As one member said, “There was animosity early on. There is less and less of that. There is a greater awareness and appreciation among members of the diversity of gifts that the two primary cultures at Salem bring. We still could do better structurally at learning from each other.” Clearly, the congregation has made great strides in cultural awareness and appreciation that leads to a unified, multiethnic congregation. Salem Lutheran is living into the eschatological promise of Revelation 7:9–10, catching a foretaste of that heavenly vision where a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language stands before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white and united in praise.

Christ, Worship, and Catechesis as Transcultural

If the resurrected Christ is renewing all things, is the thread of the church’s unity across cultures, and is the basis for the transcultural expression of the church’s life, then the church’s worship and catechesis should express the transcultural. One of the wonders of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus and their encounter with the risen Lord is that Jesus shows himself in his resurrection as Lord over all things. Through his remembrance of how all things in the Scriptures are fulfilled in him which culminates in his breaking of the bread, the Emmaus disciples’ (and our) eyes are opened, and we see that all things are brought into subservience to him and his gospel. He transcends all cultures and all cultures are brought into service to him and his rule and reign. In him reside the elements of worship and catechesis that transcend and unify all the cultures of the church’s life.

The Transcultural Telos

Those things which are transcultural in our worship and catechesis point to the one transcultural hope and telos (Eph 4) that we all have. All of us were called to one hope, a hope that transcends the inadequate and failed hopes embedded in our cultures. Those cultures and their inadequacies indicate that there is a transcultural hope for which we long. As Paul says:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; . . . We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Rom 8:19, 22–25 NRSV)

The transcultural elements of our worship and catechesis become prophetic signs of the church’s transcultural hope for the renewing rule and reign of God in Christ Jesus.

Transcultural Connections

The church is called to rejoice in and embrace the transcultural expressions of its life in Christ. As Hawn says, “While fraught with conflicting crosscurrents, establishing a new community, one new humanity in Christ is a response to Christ’s commandments to love one’s neighbor as we love ourselves, and to love one another as God loves us.”²⁹ We have to be intentional about manifesting the transcultural and cross-cultural in our worship and catechumenal practices. Redeemer in the Bronx has endeavored to do just that. The world is at Redeemer’s doorstep. Originally the home to Irish American and Italian American populations, it is now home to sizable Caribbean (especially Jamaican), Guyanese, Hispanic, and African American populations. The areas around the congregation are equally as diverse. African Americans, whites, West Indians, Asians, Hispanics, and others populate many of these areas in significant percentages. Historically this demographic shift has been a struggle for Lutheran congregations of German or Scandinavian heritage. Yet, Redeemer, out of its legacy of love, embraced this reality with joy and vigor. Following the lead of Pastor Taylor, the congregation was able to identify with and welcome the move to a non-German, diverse racial makeup. They have taken to heart being able to embrace their community and to live fully within it. Their property, especially the front lawn, is a community gathering place. The congregation itself often gathers there and invites those passing by and who live in the neighborhood to join them. At any given worship service, one might hear a Bach work on the organ, an African American spiritual as one of the hymns, and call and response during the preaching of the sermon. Fellowship over shared food is a regular part of their catechumenal gatherings. They encourage the members of the congregation to bring foods that represent the cultures of the nations.

Common transcultural elements abound at Salem as well. The transformation of their catechumenate over the past several years has aimed at holding people accountable to their life in Christ by forming people to be fully invested in the life of the Christian community at Salem. They expect their Hispanic and Anglo families who are involved either in youth or adult instruction to attend their Wednesday night family catechumenal meals and instruction. Such expectations should be transcultural. As Pastor Martin says, “If you create easy come, it is easy go.” Accountability is transcultural.

All of us through baptism become members of God’s household and share a baptismal identity as children of God. In a multicultural context forming that one household is a challenge. Salem has three worship services—a traditional, a blended, and a Spanish language service. There is not significant crossover between the three, especially between the two English-based services and the Spanish service. This leads to silos in the ministry and to the feeling that Salem is not one household across cultural boundaries. But as Pastors Gless and Martin indicate, they are striving to build those relationships across cultures into a unified household. At a gathering at Pastor Gless’s home for about forty new members in catechetical instruction, each participant listed

a fact about themselves on a piece of paper. Then each person got one of those facts and had to determine which person it belonged to by walking around the room and conversing with one another. Pastor Martin was available to translate for those who couldn't speak Spanish or English. They had to get to know one another and start building relationships.

Essential to shaping those relationships is the transcultural biblical and creedal story and the catechetical teaching accompanying that story that norms the church's life. That story, and its doctrinal expression, shapes the lives of the people at Salem. As one new Hispanic couple says, "Through immersion into that story our whole life has changed. We don't have a choice. We have to live that way" [in the way of the story of God in Christ]. Another Hispanic couple, who has taken on roles of leadership in the congregation, named another transcultural, prophetic sign when they said, "I'm experiencing 'the peace that passes all understanding,' something Pastor Martin often talks about. All the topics that reflect on immigration and this government—with everything [that is going on]—[when] Pastor Martin talks, I feel a peace." It is this transcultural story of God in Christ that brings them the very peace of God.

Salem, like Redeemer in the Bronx, is a congregation that enjoys meal fellowship together. This is true of their Wednesday family nights, their common meal on Easter Sunday, as well as their yearly Festival of Nations. These meal fellowship opportunities are transcultural events that create social cohesion and the opportunity for building relationships within the community. As one member says, if you offer meal fellowship and other kinds of social events, the Hispanics at Salem will come. And they do. As Pastor Martin says, at their Wednesday family nights they are truly one church, a transcultural family in the making.

Loving service to the neighbor and a stance of being in mission to those outside the community are transcultural values that Salem is forming in the lives of both Hispanics and Anglos. As Pastor Martin says, their Wednesday night family gatherings feel like Jesus sending out the seventy-two, to witness to the gospel and serve one another and their neighbors in love. One couple, where the wife is synodically trained, have just taken over from a veteran couple, teaching the youth confirmand class on Wednesday nights. They also are part of the group of Anglos that occasionally attend the Spanish service on Sundays. They have embraced the opportunity to connect with the youth and to help them build relationships with one another under the Word. This is an opportunity to serve the multiethnic youth of the congregation and for those leaders to form the youth to be witnesses to the gospel in their lives.

These common transcultural connections—baptismal identity as members of God's household; being formed and shaped by the common biblical story; shared catechetical teaching; regular meal fellowship as a congregation; and learning to serve the neighbor and be in mission to those around us—are all part, to different degrees, of both Redeemer's and Salem's catechumenate and worship life together. This is the

vision toward which the Nairobi Statement propels us: “The fundamental shape of the principal Sunday act of Christian worship, the Eucharist or Holy Communion, is shared across cultures: the people gather, the Word of God is proclaimed, the people intercede for the needs of the Church and the world, the eucharistic meal is shared, and the people are sent out into the world for mission.”³⁰



Girls from Salem Lutheran Church, Springdale, AR; photo by Brandon Martin, 2016 (permission to use the photo granted by parents).

The Transcultural Vision

These two girls from Salem Lutheran Church speak to the vision of a multiethnic church: transcultural, contextual, countercultural, and cross-cultural. This picture is not our culture, but we can love our brothers and sisters who live in that cultural clothing. For that is the vision of God’s rule and reign in the Word who took on flesh as an Israelite in the first century. All nations, all ethnicities, all cultures manifesting their praise to God and to the Lamb: “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rv 7:9–10 ESV). There, in God’s rule and reign, is the House of Catechesis and Prayer for all nations.

Endnotes

- 1 Kent Jorgen Bureson and Rhoda Grever Schuler, *Journey to Jesus: Faith Formation into Christ and Community* (Wipf & Stock, 2025). Based on case studies of four Lutheran congregations with strong adult catechumenal models, the book highlights the strengths of each. For the chapter on Redeemer, see pp. 72–94.
- 2 St. Michael's, formed through the mission work of Pastor Andrew Schultze (a leader in race relations in the LCMS), became a congregation of the LCMS in 1946. With the Lambert Airport expansion in the 1980s, much of the community of Kinloch was bought out by the City of St. Louis; and with the resulting steep decline in the population, the congregation closed in 1990. The 2010 census recorded a population of 298 in Kinloch. See <https://kinlochmo.org/resources/history.php>.
- 3 A.A. Just Jr., *Ever to Emmaus: A Theological Memoir* (Wipf & Stock, 2026), 168.
- 4 “The Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture,” in *Christian Worship Worldwide: Expanding Horizons, Deepening Practices*, ed. Charles E. Farhadian; Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Studies Series, ed. John D. Witvliet (Eerdmans, 2007), 285–290. The full text is also available at this site: <https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/articles/nairobi-statement-worship-and-culture-full-text>.
- 5 Nairobi Statement, par. 2.1, p. 286.
- 6 *Sound the Bamboo* CCA Hymnal 2000, ed. It-o Loh (Christian Conference of Asia, Chicago: GIA, admin., 2000).
- 7 Nairobi Statement, par. 3.1, p. 287
- 8 <https://www.missiondiscovery.org/news/what-is-contextualization/>.
- 9 Anscar Chupungco, “Inculturation of Worship: Forty Years of Progress and Tradition,” in *Worship and Culture: Foreign Country or Homeland?* ed. Gláucia Vasconcelos Wilkey (Eerdmans, 2014), 277–278. For this article, we'll consider the two terms, contextualization and inculturation, as closely related in meaning, while recognizing that the former is broader in scope and more widely used today.
- 10 *The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV with Apocrypha*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael D. Coogan; introduction to “The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians” (Oxford, 2001), 267 NT.
- 11 <https://peninsulaartssociety.org.au/what-is-the-purpose-of-art/>.
- 12 [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Spas_vsederzhitel_sinay_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Spas_vsederzhitel_sinay_(cropped).jpg). Christ the Savior (Pantokrator), a 6th-century encaustic icon from Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai. This remote monastery in the Sinai desert was isolated from the iconoclastic controversies of the seventh and eighth centuries, making this icon one of the oldest surviving icons of Christ in the world.
- 13 Nairobi Statement, par. 3.4, p. 288.
- 14 *Urban Hymnal Supplement* (Cross Lutheran Church, 1980), 25.
- 15 <https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/audio-recordings/time-perception-and-contextual-worship>. The presentation was given as part of the Vital Worship Grants Colloquium held at Calvin College on June 24, 2015; the link has both an audio version and written transcript.
- 16 <https://www.rhodaschuler.com/partners-in-the-gospel/>. This link has a host of photos from that event and a video of the clean-up time.
- 17 Nairobi Statement, par. 4.1, p. 288
- 18 <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2015/11/06/applebees-attack-victim>. According to the article, Jama came to the U.S. from Kenya in 2000 (mostly likely from a refugee camp for displaced Somalis).
- 19 <https://www.politico.com/2024-election/results/arkansas/>; Trump 64.2%, Harris 33.5%. Springdale straddles Washington and Benton Counties; Washinton County: Trump 51.7%; Harris 45%; Benton County: Trump 62.1%; Harris 35.2%.
- 20 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (HarperCollins, 1954), 21.
- 21 Nairobi Statement, par 5.1, p. 289.
- 22 C. Michael Hawn, *One Bread, One Body: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Worship* (The Alban Institute, 2003), 153.

- 23 Hawn, *One Bread, One Body*. The ten strategies are part of section 2, pages 141–716.
- 24 Hawn, *One Bread, One Body*, 145.
- 25 Hawn, *One Bread, One Body*, 146.
- 26 Hawn, *One Bread, One Body*, 159.
- 27 *Himnario Luterano* (Editorial de La Iglesia Luterana Confesional de Chile, 2021).
- 28 Hawn, *One Bread, One Body*, 157.
- 29 Hawn, *One Bread, One Body*, 142.
- 30 Nairobi Statement, par. 2.1, p. 286

Sacred Emblematics and Biblical Hermeneutics in the Lutheran Church

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Introduction to Emblems in the Early Modern Period

The study of emblems, a composition that uses text and images to communicate nuances of meaning to the interpreter, is a broad field in early modern historical research. But what is an emblem? An emblem was typically a tripartite composition of a

motto (*inscriptio*) joined to an enigmatic image (*pictura*), and underneath an epigram (*subscriptio*). Sometimes, however, two or even just one of these three elements appeared and invited the educated spectator to fill in the interpretive gaps. One may, for instance, imagine an emblem associated with the proverb, “the early bird gets the worm,” and attach to it an image of a worm hanging from the mouth of a robin in the early morning or, perhaps, a man plowing his field at sunrise with an explanation of the moral—something about industry and hard work. The emblems, however, were more than instructions about morals. According to Mara Wade, “the emblem can be considered one of the primary vehicles of cultural knowledge during the early modern period (ca. 1500–1750), capable of expressing highly complex ideas in compact and compelling forms.”¹

As a printed genre, the emblem books dealt with every possible sphere of early modern knowledge, including ethics, natural philosophy, education, religion, politics, and everyday life. Approximately 6,500 different printed volumes of emblemata were published during this period, some volumes with collections as large as 1,500 images.² Due to its multifaceted function in early modern Europe, and due to the sheer volume of emblems that were propagated not only in books, but also in churches, and

in public and private buildings throughout Europe, the study of emblematics is a rich and inviting field for interdisciplinary historical investigation. Emblems offer us levels of hermeneutical complexities because they draw together a constellation of meaning from text to image and image to text.

In sacred emblems, a constellation not only of text to image but multiple biblical passages could be joined together with a picture. For example, in the *Sacra Emblemata* of Johann Mannich (Nürnberg, 1580), which presented emblems for the feast days of the liturgical calendar, we find an image of a man carrying a great burden. It is the emblem for the Feast of St. Matthew. From heaven a hand reaches out to support the burdened traveler. Surrounding the image are the words in Latin, “the Lord’s right hand helps” with a citation from Psalm 37:24, “though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the Lord upholds his hand.” Above the emblem is a reference that appears to be Matthew 11:25[28]: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” Yet the well-known Gospel pericope for St. Matthew’s Day is Matthew 9:9–13, which ends with Jesus’s words: “For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” Beneath the emblem are two epigrams, one in Latin to teach how God helps sinners who carry the burden of sin, showing them mercy, so that they might lean under the weight of sin on his promises, and another longer epigram in German to describe the picture. It reads:

The burden is heavy /
That the Lord helps you to carry.
The man that you see here portrayed /
Shows clearly what man really is /
A clump of earth that through sin /
The devil so swiftly deceived /
The sack that the man carries along /
Shows the conscience / what it harbors inside:
The sins he cannot deny /
His own conscience accusing him.
There is no hole in this sack of sins /
To empty out what lies therein /
What’s placed in it remains for sure /
And shall remain a thousand years more.
Further still it shows you here /
That sins are a load, a great burden /
And you have so many /
Their weight is too heavy for you:
The staff you hold is God’s own Word /

It is your staff and stronghold /
 You now can go as Jacob did /
 Across the Kidron and the Jordan.
 His hand is never too short to reach /
 He helps for sure in every place:
 This load He lays on us is good
 For He / lifts and carries it.³

The layers of meaning become clear only when one can interpret the texts as interpenetrating each other and creating a kind of symphony on the theme of sin's awful weight and God's mercy for sinners. The combination of biblical texts with images trains the viewer to read Scripture fruitfully by allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture. The weight of sin is not something for us to cast off but rather becomes the cross that every Christian must learn to bear by resting on the cross of Christ who bore our sins. In other words, the Christian is not free of sin in this life, but he is relieved of the burden when he rests on the promises of God in Christ. This reference to Christ bearing our sin becomes explicitly clear in the final line of the German epigram, "He lifts and carries it." It is an interpretive key to Matthew 11 and Christ's promise of rest for anyone who comes to him. The rest of which our Lord speaks in Matthew 11:28 is, according to this emblem from the Lutheran city of Nürnberg in 1580, the forgiveness of sins. Not only do we have interpenetration of text, but we also have liturgical context that is presupposed in the emblem. For the one who inspects the image will also hear the appointed Gospel pericope for the Feast of St. Matthew, the call of Matthew (9:9–13). Those who feel the weight of sin and who cannot of themselves bear it are the ones for whom Christ has come. How can the weight of sin be good, as the epigram says? It is because Christ has come for sinners, to take the load of sin upon himself. Blessed is the sinner who trusts in him!

As this liturgically structured emblem demonstrates, each emblem has its own history and semantic field, depending on where and in what context the emblem appears. From the Reformation to the Age of Lutheran Orthodoxy, the power of sacred art and especially emblems to communicate the Word of God and shape the devotional life of the Lutheran church offers the church historian a portal into the use of Holy Scripture and its interpretation beyond the commentaries, sermons, and, dogmatic or polemical treatises. For the Lutheran church, a study of her emblems, which we find in churches and in private devotional spaces, as well as in the many popular sacred emblem books, offers us a way to more fully understand the symbolic-rich exegetical, homiletical, and devotional material of this period. A study of these emblems also reveals how the Lutheran church received the word of God and made use of the sacraments. In other words, it reveals something about what Lutherans

presupposed about God, his Word, and his work when they came to church to worship him. We find how the Lutheran faith came to expression in the images and texts that were treasured in the church. And in this way, the *emblemata* serve as memorials of the faith taught, confessed, believed, and lived.

For various reasons which do not need addressing here, many Lutheran congregations in North America have been deprived by space and time of the rich images and biblical texts or proverbs that decorate the walls, organs, altars, and epitaphs of the old Lutheran churches in Europe. We have either replaced them with arguably inferior symbols or we leave our church walls bare. In this very visual way, many of us in the west have been severed from the faith, piety, and the symbolic world that enriched our Lutheran predecessors. Whether this break is merely a matter of adiaphora or points potentially to a deficiency in our own reception of God's word today requires further consideration.

Interpreting Emblematics and their Function in Lutheran Churches

Sacred emblematics remains a branch of research, even in theology, that requires an interdisciplinary approach. It includes the historical study of sacred art, architecture, preaching, liturgics, biblical exegesis and catechesis, as well as the study of ecclesial and personal piety in the early modern age. The interdisciplinary nature of emblematics and how extensively they were used in Lutheran churches should encourage us to see the importance of texts and images together. We often lack the daily awareness of how sacred images communicate both law and gospel and give shape to our own understanding of the Christian life in Christ. Thus, the preacher—aware that an image which a whole community can decipher can have powerful effects—is tempted to draw on those images familiar to him and his hearer from pop culture, Hollywood, or perhaps, at best, the literature of Chesterton, Tolkien, and Lewis. We may attempt to use biblical examples. But without images before our eyes, the use of the image-rich language from Scripture becomes even more challenging. Our preaching and teaching, even of biblical images and examples, can easily be received as two-dimensional propositions, so that our hearers acknowledge that the Bible is true, but the message of Scripture does not take shape in them and animate true faith and love.

In contrast to the often-impoverished images of our present age, emblematics of the early modern Lutheran church “preach” and “confess” by magnifying or amplifying the message of Holy Scripture for all the senses. Early modern Lutherans took for granted that Christ redeemed mankind whole: body and soul, eyes, ears, and all our members, our reason and all our senses, as the Small Catechism teaches. Johann Anselm Steiger argues that this diversity of the media in emblematics

addresses all the human senses (*visus, auditus, tactus, gustus, olfactus*) and affects them synaesthetically. In this way, all available means are used to ensure that in handling the means of salvation (*media salutis*), i.e., the Word of God and the sacraments, the only ultimate mediator between God and man according to 1 Tim 2:5, Christ, becomes present as the “protomedium” and culmination point of vertical intermediality and, by means of this *media salutis*, mystically unites himself with the communicants, transforming them into himself and himself into them.⁴

The *ars emblematica* (art of sacred emblematics) as a form of biblical interpretation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of the Lutheran church may help us today, not by repristinating the semantic field of the early modern period, but by recognizing how richly the Scriptures speak and to imitate their art of interpreting where it is fruitful. I do not intend here to plow any new ground in the field of emblematics, nor to survey the long tradition of symbolism in the ancient world or through church history, but simply to make readers aware that this field of study exists. Knowledge of this multi-dimensional and multi-media delivery of God’s word in both image and text and text and image, and sometimes image-image and text-text may broaden our own horizons for preaching, teaching, and devotion to Christ and his word. If nothing else, awareness of the renewal of emblematics in academic and church life in the early modern period will help us better understand Luther and the Lutheran fathers, who lived in a world of sacred images that served as material for their own preaching, teaching, and devotion. For instance, as we examine translations old and new, especially of our church’s devotional writings, sermons, and hymns from the Reformation to the Age of Orthodoxy and early Pietism, a historical awareness of sacred symbolism and the role of images or common emblems will assist our interpretation and appreciation for our church’s rich multimedia devotional material. For instance, it requires a trained mind to sing the great Passion hymns of Gerhardt, Heermann, von Birken, and Rist without a crucifix before one’s eyes, as they had before their eyes, in their churches and in their studies. It is not that a crucifix determines one’s orthodoxy or piety, but that the Scriptures portray our Lord as the crucified one (Mt 28:5; Gal 3:1). The artwork, like the confession of faith, results from receiving the Word. The Word is received and then brought to multimedial expression. That is one thing emblematics can teach.

My other intention in writing on emblematics is to make readers aware of the research publications of Johann Anselm Steiger in Hamburg. His writings and multivolume editorial works on sacred emblematics in the Lutheran church throughout Europe over the past decade have been the impetus for many of my own hermeneutical reflections.⁵ On the basis of his research, some fundamental hermeneutical questions

emerge about the relationship between word, image, and interpreter in the art of interpretation (*ars interpretandi*) for both emblematics and Scripture.

Steiger's eight-volume study on sacred, extrabiblical emblematics in the Baltic region, *Emblematik in Sakralbauten des Ostseeraums: Geistliche Intermedialität in der Frühen Neuzeit* (2023) is accompanied by his introduction to the project in English, *Spiritual Intermediality and Spiritual Emblematics in the Early Modern Period: Media Theoretical and Historical-Theological Foundations* (2024; see the link to the free download in endnote 5). Steiger applies the hermeneutical method used in the early modern theory of emblems, represented by Georg Philipp Harsdörffer (1609–1658), to interpret emblems and emblem cycles. Harsdörffer taught that emblems in a collection—for example, on the same page in a printed book or in the same room or collection, as on an altar piece with various wings—should be combined, so that one text or image helps interpret the next, and so on. The intermediality can be straightforward or complex, depending on the relationship of the images and texts. Following this emblematic-hermeneutic principle from Harsdörffer, Steiger argues that

emblems, which in themselves are already intermedial entities, do not simply “illustrate” or “decorate” the texts or artifacts to which they are attached, or merely duplicate or repeat certain firmly established or even self-evident statements. Rather, by means of text-image combinations, which Matthias Holtzwardt (ca. 1540–before 1579) tried to conceptualize as “Picta Poesis” or “Gemälpoesy,” emblems have *prima vista* surprising, sometimes strange, or even hermeneutic quality, i.e., a fact to be deciphered and translated (not infrequently laboriously) in the synopsis of images and short texts and to generate semantic added values.⁶

In other words, it would be a mistake to suppose that the function of emblematics is to pair together words and images so that an enigmatic image becomes understood merely by association.

A similar phenomenon occurs when those who first encounter biblical typology believe that typology is nothing more than correlation. When Paul says that Israel was baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea (1 Cor 10:1), he is not suggesting merely that Moses is a picture of Christ, or that the Exodus was merely a picture of baptism. Paul's intertextuality brings new meaning to both, so that one cannot understand baptism apart from God's redemption of Israel from bondage in Egypt and the tyranny of Pharaoh. Nor can one understand the rescue of Israel without understanding God's saving work in Holy Baptism, by which he rescues us from sin, death, and the devil. Typology does not resolve the complexity of meaning but enriches meaning through the intertextuality or, in the case of images to text, intermediality, or in the case of image to image, interpictureoriality.

Steiger notes that many emblems and emblem cycles remain in part ambiguous. The ambiguity can be due to several factors. One common reason is that the emblem-*picturae* can be repurposed, so that the same image can be used to mean two or more things. He gives the example of a diamond, which often signifies hardening or hardness of the heart, but can also signify the purity of the Virgin Mary or the Son of God. Ambiguities can only be solved by intermedial interpretation.⁷ Sometimes, however, even the texts have double meanings, and thus the possibility of ambiguity remains. Clarity and ambiguity, revealing and hiding belong to the emblems as these do to Holy Scripture. Even after reading all the epigrams and references, a picture may remain hidden, or a text may remain hidden. “Such ambiguous spiritual emblems,” Steiger observes, “relate to the reality of life and faith of human beings, who likewise are and remain enigmas as long as, according to Col 3:3 their . . . life is hidden with Christ in God.”⁸ Concerning the ambiguities, it seems clear why emblematics faded during the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers, dedicated to neology and rational unambiguous language were, according to Steiger, “overtaxed to adapt adequately the *eruditio* compressed in the highest density in emblematics, together with its roots reaching back into (Christian and pagan) antiquity. An anti-emblematic iconoclasm was obvious considering this excessive demand, but it did not solve the self-imposed problem.”⁹ The Enlightenment therefore demanded rational precision with our language but has in its exactness deprived us of meaning.

Considering an ornate pulpit in Vedersø, Denmark, Steiger addresses a hermeneutical problem in emblematics and in Scripture between revealing and concealing. The pulpit presents four similar images concerning the task and office of preaching. The text from 1 Corinthians 14:11—“if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker to me”—is traced around the pulpit. The task of preaching is to interpret and translate, so that others can understand (revealing). However, in Luther’s marginal note on 1 Corinthians 14:13–15, concerning praying in the spirit and in the mind [*im Sinn*], he writes: “To speak according to sense is just as much as to interpret and explain the sense to the others. But to speak in the spirit is to understand the sense itself and not to interpret it.” Luther acknowledges two kinds of speech, one internal, perhaps deeper, but only for the welfare of one’s own understanding in the Spirit, and another external speech by which one makes known the meaning of the Scriptures for others. Luther maintained a similar distinction in his writing against Erasmus, *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525), but called it Scripture’s internal perspicuity and external perspicuity. The character of the Scriptures is to both be hidden and revealed, believed in the heart, and made known publicly by the preaching of the gospel. The move from the internal perspicuity to the external clarity suggests a process of unraveling and deciphering the meaning of the Scripture. Here we find one of the great difficulties of the interpretive task, namely, to unravel the mystery of Scripture in Christ, so that we

might speak and teach clearly from Scripture, rebuke or console others. Steiger writes, “according to the early modern view, the enigmaticity by no means determines only the emblemata, but is a characteristic of God’s revelation as a whole until Judgment Day. . . . Therefore, the unceasing discovery and uncovering of the word of God is the permanent task of the (multimedial) sermon.”¹⁰

The role of emblematics in the early modern period was both to instruct and to demand of those who seek to decipher them. Steiger writes, “[T]he *ars emblematica* operates precisely within this tension between *absconditas* and *revelatio*, between *obscuritas* and *claritas*.”¹¹ Steiger address in his introduction other interpretive keys, such as the eschatological vantage point of God in the emblems. God’s creative gaze forever sees man as redeemed, as the restored image of God. The mediality of the gaze and the image which allows the observer to see the gaze of God is to understand eternity as “time without time.”¹² More could be said of these themes, but it is enough to know of sacred emblematics as an important form of biblical exegesis in the early modern period. The study of emblems not only reveals the Scriptures, but like the Scriptures, they hide and must be deciphered by faith.

Steiger’s volumes are filled with photos and commentary on the emblems and emblem cycles found in the churches throughout the Baltic region. The commentaries on the emblems intersperse interpretations that include Scripture, writings from Luther and the Lutheran fathers that would illumine and confirm the meaning of the emblems, historical background to the church and its confession. All of these give us a greater appreciation for the depth of biblical wisdom that our Lutheran forefathers possessed. It is a reminder and encouragement for us to be diligent in our study of the Scriptures and learn both the pedagogical and spiritual fruit derived from letting Scripture interpret Scripture (intertextuality) and image and text work intermedially with one another. Whatever progress we have made in our exegesis and preaching, it does not appear that we have become richer for it. A further exploration of these emblems may give back joy and life in our reading, preaching, and teaching of Scripture that we all sense is missing today.

Endnotes

- 1 See Mara R. Wade, "What is an Emblem" at *Emblematica Online*, a project supported by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in partnership with the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel, Germany. <http://emblematica.library.illinois.edu/help/what-emblem>.
- 2 For an introduction to the literature on printed *emblemata*, see Peter M. Daly, *The Emblem in Early Modern Europe: Contributions to the Theory of the Emblem* (Ashgate Publishing, 2014). For further reading and access to the broad field of published emblems and their interpretation, see the annual scholarly publication, *Emblematica: Essays in Word and Image*. <https://emblematicajournal.com/volumes/>.
- 3 Arthur Henkel and Albrecht Schöne, *Emblemata: Handbuch Zur Sinnbildkunst Des XVI und XVII Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1967/1996), 1086.
- 4 Johann Anselm Steiger, *Spiritual Intermediality and Spiritual Emblematics in the Early Modern: Media Theoretical and Historical-Theological Foundations* (Schnell & Steiner, 2024), 8.
- 5 Johann Anselm Steiger, "Geh' Aus, Mein Herz, und Suche Freud": *Paul Gerhards Sommerlied und die Gelehrsamkeit der Barockzeit* (Naturkunde, Emblematik, Theologie) (De Gruyter, 2007); Johann Anselm Steiger, *Gedächtnisorte der Reformation: Sakrale Kunst in Luthers Norden* (16.-18. Jahrhundert) (Schnell & Steiner, 2016); Johann Anselm Steiger, *Bibelauslegung Durch Bilder: Zur Sakralen Intermedialität Im 16. Bis 18. Jahrhundert* (Schnell & Steiner, 2018); Johann Anselm Steiger, *Emblematik in Sakralbauten Des Ostseeraums*, 8 Bde (Schnell & Steiner, 2023); Steiger, *Spiritual Intermediality*. Steiger's introductory text to his eight-volume work, *Emblematik in Sakralbauten des Ostseeraums*, is available in English as a free, downloadable, open source: <https://openresearchlibrary.org/content/0ef454f4-1a7a-447c-931a-7c6371d-7d1ce>.
- 6 Steiger, *Spiritual Intermediality*, 11–12.
- 7 Steiger, *Spiritual Intermediality*, 15.
- 8 Steiger, *Spiritual Intermediality*, 16.
- 9 Steiger, *Spiritual Intermediality*, 16.
- 10 Steiger, *Spiritual Intermediality*, 20.
- 11 Steiger, *Spiritual Intermediality*, 24.
- 12 Steiger, *Spiritual Intermediality*, 30.

The Stories (Hidden) in the Story of God Preaching as Midrash

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Every summer since 2009, I have co-led the Faith and Writing Workshop on the campus of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Alumni of the workshop now number in the hundreds. Over the years, the workshop has evolved and grown (the summer of 2026 we had our highest in-person attendance ever), but one element of it has remained nearly unchanged since the beginning.

On the first afternoon of the workshop, after we have made our introductions and laid the groundwork for why we are all here together, I ask the writers to do their first writing exercise by introducing them to a Hebrew word: *midrash*. I was first introduced to the idea of midrash in college when I read a book by Marc Gellman titled *Does God Have a Big Toe?: Stories About Stories in the Bible*. Gellman's book is a collection of children's stories written as midrash, and the subtitle gives his definition for what midrash is. In the workshop, we propose the midrash as a creative exercise to enter into the biblical imagination of the Scriptures. To this day, past participants will recall to me how "the midrash" was one of the highlights of their workshop experience, and how it continues to guide not only their writing, but how they read the Bible. This includes many pastors who have used the idea and process of midrash in their preaching. It is this last fact that inspires the thesis of this article, namely that the idea and process of midrash provides a way to enter into the biblical imagination for the sake of proclaiming the gospel.

What is midrash?

The Hebrew word *midrash* (plural: *midrashim*) derives from the Hebrew verb *d'rash*, meaning to search out, to seek, to inquire. It is a form of Jewish rabbinic interpretation that, in textual form, ran primarily from 400–1200 CE. As such, it is, in many ways, the first literary interpretation of the Bible. In the Talmud, it exists in both the *Halakhah* (legal material) and *Aggadah* (biblical exegesis), and almost any scholar of the Hebrew Bible, especially any with an interest in the history of exegesis, will have had to go through the painstaking ordeal of sifting through the Talmudic midrash at some point in their careers.¹ But before this textual tradition, midrash existed as oral traditions, and as best as we can tell, these oral traditions often found their origins as homilies first delivered in synagogues.

Midrash as a term refers to two things. First, it is a type or genre of literature, found in the vast collections of texts in the Talmud. Second, it is itself a process of reading, interpreting, or exegeting any sacred text. The writer and anthologist David Curzon summarizes three aspects to the “typical midrash”:

This typical midrash has three basic characteristics: it is a response to a specific and very short biblical text, the response is imaginative, and it makes a point . . . [T]he genre is a tolerant one; a midrash is one response among many possibilities, not some definitive interpretation.²

This last point is what makes midrash more of a homiletical exercise than an exegetical one, although it relies heavily on exegetical insights to make its homiletical “point.”

Historically, midrash emerges out of “the need to deal with the presence of cultural or religious tension and discontinuity. Where there are questions that demand answers, and there are new cultural and intellectual pressures that must be addressed, midrash comes into play as a way of resolving crisis and reaffirming continuity with the traditions of the past.”³ We could locate the historical crisis and discontinuity in two events: (1) the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, and the subsequent need to reinterpret the Hebrew Bible in light of that trauma; and, (2) the emerging exile and diaspora of the Jewish people into ancient and medieval Europe and beyond.

How does midrash work?

Inasmuch as rabbinic midrash arises out of deep “tension and discontinuity” rooted in religious history, culture, and identity, its method for dealing with it is—perhaps surprisingly—one of imaginative engagement, even playfulness, with the biblical text. As such, it arises out of the characteristic style of Hebrew narratives, a style that we can see carried forward into the New Testament Gospels, and especially Jesus’s own parables:

What we notice at once is that the very style of the Bible creates a kind of tension that the rabbinic sages were forced to confront. . . . The Bible is loath to tell us the motivations, feelings, or thoughts of characters. Rarely giving us descriptive details either of people or places, it is composed in a stark, uncompromising style.⁴

This “stark, uncompromising style” is what Erich Auerbach, in his seminal essay “Odysseus’ Scar,” would characterize as the Hebrew Bible’s literary signature. As opposed to the Homeric epic style where everything happens in the “foreground” of the ongoing present moment, Hebrew narrative shrouds its details in mystery and silence, and the narrative is, in Auerbach’s famous phrase, “fraught with background.”⁵ To resolve this tension, and at its simplest, midrash works by looking for gaps in these sacred stories and filling those *gaps* by telling other stories that in some way illuminate the original biblical text. Where the Bible teases us with a silence of details, midrash responds in kind by asking a question to speak into that silence. Some of the more famous rabbinic midrashim ask questions like these:

How tall was Adam in Eden?

What did Abraham’s father do for a living?

With what voice did God speak to Moses in the burning bush?

To answer these questions, individual midrash can be wildly imaginative, with a wide use of wordplay and puns. The midrashic literature includes sermons, debates, stories, parables, anecdotes, riddles, even jokes, and rabbis in the Talmud will frequently use their own midrash to argue with, and pose alternative answers to, preceding midrash of other rabbis. These questions usually center on profound ambiguities in either the biblical narrative or its language. Thus, the pioneering twentieth-century scholar of Jewish midrash, Isaac Heinemann, speaks of midrashic style taking the form of either “creative historiography” (the text as narrative: parables, anecdotes, etc.) or “creative philology” (the text as language: wordplay, puns, etc.).⁶

At this point, allow me to anticipate a concern. The key to midrash is not that this imaginative exploration into the biblical text is some kind of fanciful digression that wanders down its own fairy-tale rabbit hole. The questions the rabbis ask become true midrash when their answers circle back to reflect on the original text, illuminating it in fruitful ways, opening up the mysteries of its meaning, all while staying true to—even dwelling within—the original narrative and language of the biblical text. Or as Barry Holtz describes, “To the rabbis there were no inconsistencies, no problems in transmission (as a modern biblical critic might say), there were only mysteries of meaning that needed to be unlocked.”⁷ For the rabbis, these supposed gaps do not reflect a weakness or deficiency in the biblical text. Rather, their central conviction was that these gaps were *intentional*. They were God’s divine invitation to enter into the Scriptures. Midrash provides a way to read

the Scriptures on its own terms, as a living, creative engagement with a living, creative Word. As such, in midrashic terms, we can never exhaust a biblical text's meaning. For the midrashic mind, the absences, silences, and gaps in the text become openings into the mystery of God. They open up generative possibilities for engaging the difficulties of any biblical text, and, as such, are an opportunity for the reader, made in the image of God, to encounter God in the inspired sacred story of God. For the rabbis, this is how reading the biblical text invites further re-reading, each reading opening up new meaning and insight. In homiletical terms, midrashic interpretation provides a holistic, (pre) modern alternative to strictly modernist, historical modes of interpretation.

In this light, how the midrashim actually appear on the pages of the Talmud is itself illuminating. (*Image on the right*)

The primary text sits in the center of the page. Around it, filling every blank space, are the rabbis' midrashic commentaries. The midrashim are, literally, the notes filling the margins.⁸

For all these reasons, this is why midrash has become popular in broader literary theory, beyond biblical studies. The magisterial *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* has its own entry on midrash (under "Hebrew poetics"), asserting that it is "something between interpretive and creative writing. . . . This model of interpretive or hermeneutical discourse is congenial to some modern theorists who welcome the merging of the critical and creative functions [of literary interpretation]." It then cites John Milton's seventeenth-century epic poem *Paradise Lost* as a kind of midrash of Genesis 1–3.⁹

An example of midrash: Moses and the burning bush

A paradigmatic example of rabbinic midrash in action is the episode of Moses and the theophany of the burning bush in Exodus 3. One of the first questions the midrash asks is: what kind of bush was the burning bush? The text, of course, does not say, so



Midrashim appear on the pages of the Talmud

the rabbis were left to wonder. Jewish tradition asserted that it was a thorn-bush. Thus begins this midrash, riffing on the question:

A heathen once asked R[abbi] Joshua b[en] Karah (others say R. Gamaliel): “Why did God choose a thorn-bush from which to speak to Moses?” He replied: “If it had been a carob tree or a sycamore tree you would have asked the same question; but to dismiss you without reply is not right, so I will tell you why. To teach you that no place is devoid of God’s presence, not even a thorn-bush.”¹⁰

Exegetically, of course, the conjecture that the bush was a thorn-bush bears little textual weight. But *homiletically*, it will preach: “no place is devoid of God’s presence.” A Christian preacher could even draw christological parallels to the crown of thorns, that not even the tree that was the cross was devoid of God’s presence.

But in the context of the rabbinic midrashim, this first question leads naturally into another: if God chose a thorn-bush from which to speak to Moses, with what voice did God speak? Again, Exodus 3 does not say. One midrash answers with a profound simplicity: “With Moses’ own voice.” This midrash reads the silent voice fixed to the page as a kind of mirror. Moses hears his own voice from outside himself, in a kind of divine ventriloquism. Notice how this midrash thus mirrors back on the Tetragrammaton, the name God gives to himself (3:14). In the imagination of this midrash, “I am who I am” takes on a kind of universal identity, God speaking his name in the voice of one created in the image of God. All of which lends an interestingly incarnational resonance to the rabbi’s answer to the question.

All that said, another midrash disagrees with this simple answer and slants another way. The rabbi conjectures the thoughts of God, in the pregnant pause before God speaks, in a kind of internal dramatic monologue:

Rabbi Judah ben Nehemiah said: since Moses, was a novice in prophecy, God said—if I reveal Myself unto him with a loud voice, I will frighten him, and if in a low voice, he will think lightly of the prophecy. So what did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He revealed himself to him in the voice of his father.¹¹

Why would the rabbi conjecture God’s voice in the voice of Moses’s father? The paradox hidden in the rabbi’s answer is that the text of Exodus itself implies that Moses never heard his birth father’s voice or at least would not have remembered it. As you recall, when he was three months old, Moses was stolen away in a papyrus basket on the Nile to be purposely discovered by pharaoh’s daughter, and to be raised in pharaoh’s court. So, we—as readers of both the biblical text *and* these midrashim—are left to wonder: how could Moses have recognized his father’s voice, a voice he

could not have remembered? Notice now how the mysterious nature of the midrash seems to reflect the mysteries of the sacred text. Perhaps something in the sound of the voice—an echo of its tone or timbre—awakened an earliest memory that Moses never even knew was there. And perhaps this then becomes part of Moses's experience of the revelation of God, and how it perhaps conjures within Moses a new humanity he could not have known otherwise, a humanity deep enough to lead God's people out of slavery into freedom.

Notice now too how the midrash invites us into our own midrashic reflection on the biblical text, and, even further, how it invites us into a living contemplation of the nature of God. Our wondering at the wonderings written along the margins, and the ways these wonderings speak to each other and to us, hint at the heart of midrash, the way it unearths secrets hidden deep within a text we hold to be sacred. It is enough to make any child made in the image of God wonder when he or she is asked the question, whose voice do you hear when you hear the voice of God?¹²

Another example: Jesus and the lawyer

To the extent that we do not know how far back into history the oral traditions of midrash go, some biblical scholars have wondered if the Bible contains its own midrash, as a form of scripture interpreting scripture.¹³ Moreover, some have wondered if Jesus of Nazareth himself was aware of midrash, especially to the degree that one could read at least some of his parables as a form of midrash. In that vein, consider one of his most famous parables recounted in Luke 10:25–37. The frame for the parable is set by a “lawyer” who stands up among his disciples to test Jesus with a question: “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 25). Jesus responds in kind: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” (v. 26). It is a small detail, but it is worth noting that Jesus is inviting the lawyer into an act of *reading*. Jesus is asking him to interpret what he sees in the pages of the Torah. The lawyer responds by combining Deuteronomy 6:4–5 (the Shema) with Leviticus 19:18, a combination Jesus himself cites as the greatest commandment(s) in Mark 12:28–31, itself a response to a question from a scribe. The lawyer's response is already pseudo-midrashic in the sense that he merges two texts of Torah to interconnect love of God with love of neighbor. Similarly, much midrash is simply an exercise in what we would today call “intertextuality.”

The dialogue could have ended right there, and Jesus says as much by affirming his answer. But the lawyer will not let it go. So, he asks a second, more incisive question: “And who is my neighbor?” (v. 29). Whether the lawyer was aware of the term or not, this is exactly the kind of question a midrash would ask. Leviticus does not specify who the neighbor is. It is a gap in the text. So, the lawyer is only doing what any rabbi worth his salt would do. And none of this seems to be lost on the lawyer's “teacher.” At this very moment, Jesus could have given the lawyer a straight answer, a philosophical

lecture on the nature of the neighbor, a sermon series on the seven traits that make a person a neighbor. But if the lawyer wants to midrash, Jesus can midrash: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers . . .” (v. 30). As any good midrash would, Jesus tells him a story. And as written for us in the Gospel of Luke, it is perhaps one of the most famous stories ever told.

But notice what happens by the end of the parable. Jesus turns the lawyer’s question back on him: “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” (v. 36). The answer is obvious: “The one who showed him mercy” (v. 37). But what isn’t as obvious is what Jesus has now done with the original texts of Torah. He has turned the lawyer’s presumed definition of neighbor on its head. Where the lawyer assumed the neighbor was the person to whom he should show mercy, Jesus shows him a neighbor—the despised foreigner he would least want to love—who would show *him* mercy. All this to completely subvert the lawyer’s attempt “to justify himself” (v. 29). Whatever we may think about its historical origins, this is a master class in midrash, and it could just as easily find its place in the margin of the page of the Talmud that displays the text of Leviticus 19:18.

Preaching as midrash

What does this mean for all of us? At least part of the reason I want to advocate for midrash as one of the many tools preachers have at their disposal is that many preachers are already doing it. Any preacher who has considered questions like “What was Thomas doing that he wasn’t in the upper room the first time the risen Christ showed up?” or “What happened to that centurion at Golgotha after Good Friday?” is already doing midrash, even if they do not have a word for it. The same goes for any sermon that has ever been delivered as a dramatic monologue in the voice of an otherwise silent biblical character. But now we have a name for it, and we can develop a process around it.

Moreover, I believe that in many ways midrash can help us account for the phenomenon that happens every week within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church on earth. On any given Sunday, there are as many sermons on a single biblical text as there are preachers stepping into a pulpit. If it were possible to find a sheet of paper long and wide enough, we could print those sermons in conversation with each other in just the same way as the midrashim are printed in the margins of every page of the Talmud. Even further, even within one preacher’s career, the sermons can enter into a midrashic conversation with each other. The sermon I will preach this coming Sunday on this particular text is not the same sermon I preached on this particular text three years ago, and it will not be the same sermon I will preach three years from now. And all of this is a very good thing. It means we too are taking up the divine invitation to enter into the biblical text and encounter the living Word of God as we

find it there on this day, gathered among these people. Each reading invites further re-reading.

So then, what would a preacher's process for midrash look like? How can we "think midrashically" as part of the preaching task? Allow me to propose three points of reference.

1. Seek out a gap, a silence, an absence in a specific text. And when you find it, remember that it is not a deficiency in the text, but an opportunity to enter into the mysteries of the biblical imagination and the mystery of the God we find there.
2. Try to keep the scale of the biblical text small, even tiny. Midrash is sometimes referred to as a "verse-centered" literature.¹⁴ The best midrashic questions are specific and concrete, always rooted in a close reading of the biblical text. Sometimes that close reading centers on the scriptural narrative, sometimes on the scriptural language, sometimes even on one simple word, like the word "cushion" in Mark 4:38.¹⁵
3. Ask an incisive question that enters into the gap, that listens for the still, small voice in the midst of that silence. Ask a question that forces you to dig deeper into the text to find its answer. This requires a holy imagination to engage with the text, but it is also where we can see how "scripture interprets scripture."

Wherever the question leads, hopefully it bears fruit in theological insight and spiritual wisdom. From there, we have all the tools at our disposal to develop the focus, function, form, and structure of a sermon toward an effective proclamation of the gospel.

I have found that the process of midrash often helps me when I preach in the subjunctive mood, a mode of holy conjecture that invites and engages the hearer's imagination. I see it at work anytime I speak a sentence that begins with something like "I wonder if . . ." or "Could it be that . . ." But the goal will always be that our answer to the midrashic question is not a frivolous dive down a rabbit-hole. Our wonderings will always circle us back to the biblical text, to dwell more deeply within it, to let it illuminate our lives in a new way, opening up its meanings in ways we never saw before. And then to invite our hearers to sit with us there.¹⁶

In conclusion: a prologue to a parable

In summary, two primary motivations attract me to midrash as a homiletical method or exercise. First, it approaches the biblical text as the truly literary text that it is. It opens up the possibility to enter into the biblical imagination, under the assumption that the text is a creative, living word that is always more than its history.¹⁷ Thus, secondly, it gives me a way to enter into the biblical text as a Story (capital S) that is always bigger than my story (lowercase s). The primary homiletical move of midrash

is to see the narrative of my life—and that of my hearers—absorbed into and within the biblical narrative rather than the other way around.¹⁸ The task then becomes not to extract meaning from the biblical text, but to allow the text's meaning to become my/our meaning.

So, as a last exercise, I want to do here what we ask our writers to do every summer. For a long time, I have been haunted by an absence, a ghost, in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). It became a midrashic question that I have wrestled with ever since, namely: where is the mother of the house? As a creative writer, I once tried to answer that question by writing an “epilogue” of sorts to Jesus's parable, where the mother appears after the end of the story, walking her way down to the elder brother still wallowing in the field. After an extended dialogue, she becomes the one who is able to convince the elder brother to walk with her back to the house and join the celebration. I viewed it as a way to highlight the need for reconciliation at the heart of the parable while providing a happy aftermath to the story. As it turns out, too happy. To put it bluntly, it was a disaster. As I tried to revise it, it rang less and less true—and more and more false—to Jesus's parable. It wrecked the powerful conclusive tension, the open-ended suspense, that is so key to what Jesus is trying to do by telling—and ending—the parable the way he did. In cinematic terms, this parable invented the ending that we now call the “cliffhanger,” and it needs to end that way.

But there is a more fundamental, and even more haunting, question that often gets asked of this famous parable: why did the younger son ask for his inheritance in the first place? I suspect more than a few sermons have tried, consciously or unconsciously, to answer that question. A few years ago, it hit me that perhaps there is a midrash that could answer both of these questions at the same time. And so I wrote a second midrash that is a “prologue” of sorts to Jesus's parable, a way of introducing the story that both imagines why there is no mother in the story, and why her absence may have motivated the one act that set into motion this one story that has inspired a thousand stories that, each in their own way, retell it. In my mind, it is still a work-in-progress. But I present it to you here as a final creative word for the homiletical power of midrash, and for its divine invitation.

*

The last week was the hardest for him. His mother was already in hospice, but the tumor had so strangled her brain that whatever she said or did no longer made sense. It made sense inside her own head, so she would get angry when the three of them couldn't make sense of it themselves. The doctor explained that the cancer made the neurons fire in all sorts of weird ways, that this wasn't out of the ordinary, that he had seen it all before. But the scientific rationalizations only went so far.

“Be sure to give your cousin Pat his asbestos pills.”

The three of them looked at each other. Until his brother, always the first to speak up, couldn't stand the silence any longer and asked, “Who's Pat?” She huffed, swore at them with a word they had never heard her say before, and told them all to get out and leave her alone.

The hardest part was that the sound of her voice was the same as it always was, the low song of words that had soothed him since his littlest days. But the words were all off kilter.

That night their father explained that she had a cousin who died from asbestos poisoning a long time ago. He demolished houses for a construction company before they knew how the mineral's microscopic shards tore up a person's lungs. But the cousin's name was Jake. He had no idea who Pat was.

For a long time already, the boy had been plotting what he might do after she was gone. He had started thinking about it not long after the diagnosis. But it was a week after the funeral when he finally made up his mind. All the leftovers from the neighbors were gone, and the three of them were sitting around the kitchen table with nothing to eat, staring into the empty space between them. This was the moment when the silence, for him, became unbearable. He looked at the empty chair closest to the refrigerator, and he knew he couldn't stand to be there a minute longer.

He slept little that night. The next morning, he found his father in the family room, stretched out on the recliner. His brother had already left for work. An open book sat in his father's lap. On the desk next to the recliner sat the stack of papers that had been sitting there for months. The cover page declared in bold type, “Living Trust.” His father's bare feet patted the floor because the lever to the footrest broke off the week before. He was wearing the green plaid shirt he wore yesterday, only untucked, so the boy assumed he slept there all night. His eyes were puffy and bloodshot, but his father looked up at him with a flash of light that made his son think he had been expecting him. So he decided to skip the list of reasons he had written out inside his mind—he figured his father already knew why—and he just came right out with it.

“Dad, I want my share of the inheritance now . . .”

Endnotes

- 1 Or so I've been told by Concordia Seminary's Gustav and Sophie Butterbach Professor of Exegetical Theology, Tim Saleska.
- 2 David Curzon, *Modern Poems on the Bible: An Anthology* (Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 4–5. Curzon uses the idea of midrash to organize an anthology of modern and contemporary poems which he characterizes as “midrashim” on various biblical texts.
- 3 Barry W. Holtz, *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (Simon & Schuster, 1986), 179.
- 4 Holtz, 179–180.
- 5 Erich Auerbach, “Odysseus' Scar,” in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 3–23.
- 6 See Holtz, 189ff.
- 7 Holtz, 192.
- 8 In this sense, I think of the voluminous study notes on the pages of any study Bible being their own kind of midrash on the biblical text.
- 9 *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed., edited by Roland Greene, Stephen Cushman, et al. (Princeton University Press, 2012), 600.
- 10 See Curzon, 334. Curzon quotes this midrash directly from *Midrash Rabbah*, 3rd ed. (Soncino Press, 1983), 3:53.
- 11 Abigail Treu, “The Voice from the Burning Bush,” <https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/the-voice-from-the-burning-bush/>. Treu quotes the midrash from *Exodus Rabbah* 45:5.
- 12 For those who might be interested in delving deeper into the rabbinic midrashim, Louis Ginzberg's seven-volume *The Legends of the Jews* is the greatest single collection of midrash. Smaller, more recent collections include Reuven Hammer's *The Classic Midrash* (in Paulist Press' Classics of Western Spirituality series) and Nahum Glatzer's *Hammer on the Rock*.
- 13 The term midrash appears in the Hebrew Bible in 2 Chronicles 13:22 and 24:27. The ESV translates both occurrences as “story.” Other versions translate 24:27 as “commentary.”
- 14 Holtz 187.
- 15 For reference, see what Frederick Buechner does (midrashically) with that cushion in *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (HarperCollins, 1979), 69–72.
- 16 As my Faith and Writing Workshop co-leader, Peter Mead, likes to point out, one need look no further than Martin Luther's own beloved Christmas sermons to see how Luther the preacher reflected midrashically (even if he didn't have the word for it) on a biblical text, to beautiful effect.
- 17 In terms of hermeneutics, I have in mind here Paul Ricoeur's concept of “the surplus of meaning” (cf. his book *Interpretation Theory*).
- 18 In terms of hermeneutics, I have in mind here Hans Frei's ideas about “narrative interpretation” (cf. his book *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative*).

Homiletical Helps

Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived Should AI Help Write Sermons?

T*angible: Theology Learned and Lived* is a bi-monthly podcast produced by the department of Theological Research and Publications at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The following is a transcript of portions of the April 2026 episode “Should AI Help Write Sermons?” The episode was produced and hosted by Jessica Bordeleau, MAR, featuring guests Dr. Ryan Tinetti, assistant professor of practical theology and Dr. David Maxwell, professor of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

Jessica Bordeleau:

Welcome to *Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived*. We’re exploring ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life. Through conversations with faculty at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ. I’m your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. I’ll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode, but all pointing to the intersection of faith and daily life. It’s tangible, theology learned and lived.

Should pastors use AI to write their sermons? Should teachers use ChatGPT to help write their lesson plans and lectures? That’s the question. Here to discuss, we have Dr. Ryan Tinetti, assistant professor of practical theology here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Dr. Tinetti is a sought-after speaker, he has preached throughout the US and overseas and has been a guest preacher on *The Lutheran Hour*. His books include *Preaching by Heart* and *The Quiet Ambition*. Dr. Tinetti also

writes a regular column called “The Preacher’s Toolbox” for the “Craft of Preaching” section on the *Working Preacher* website. Dr. Tinetti, thanks for being on the show.

Ryan Tinetti:

I’m delighted to be with you.

Bordeleau: Dr. David Maxwell has been professor of systematic theology here at Concordia Seminary since 2004 and serves as the chairman of the systematic theology department. His primary research area is the early church; he’s published translations of commentaries originally written in ancient Greek. In addition to his extensive study of ancient languages, he hosts a weekly online Greek discussion group which is carried out entirely in Greek. Dr. Maxwell, thanks for being on the show again.

David Maxwell:

Thanks, Jessica. It’s great to be here.

Bordeleau: While these two men have very different areas of interest, something they have in common is that they are known for being excellent preachers. I’ll vouch for it; I’ve heard them. So where do these excellent sermons come from? And does it even matter as long as they’re good? That’s the question. Let’s start with this: what are the reasons you’ve heard people give in favor of AI generated sermons and lectures?

Tinetti: I would say the biggest reason that people give in favor of it is time. They say this can be a tremendous time saver for busy pastors and teachers. AI can really help expedite that process.

Bordeleau: Instead of spending hours alone in their office laboring over these sermons for us, pastors could be out there doing hospital visits, taking care of people. That sounds practical, it makes sense. What do you think, Dr. Maxwell? Is that a fair reason to use AI to help plan your sermon?

Maxwell: The question I would have is, how do you envision they would use AI exactly? I know in the post that Ryan wrote, one of the concerns is that skills would atrophy. There’s a sense in which you would harm the pastor. Maybe one question to pursue is to consider ways of using it that could actually help sharpen your skills.

Tinetti: Sure. What would be an example of a way that could help sharpen your skills?

Maxwell: Well, you might imagine that you write the sermon and then you feed it into AI and ask it to critique it from maybe a Lutheran theological perspective, vocabulary grade level, or coherency. That would be a way where it seems to me that it wouldn't be causing your skills to atrophy. It might actually sharpen them.

Tinetti: Andy Crouch, in his book *Culture Making*, talks about how every new technological advance makes some things possible and some things impossible, or at least really difficult. For example, GPS makes it possible for me to find my way, but it undeniably erodes my ability to find my way in the world. I'm less able to attend to the world in a way that isn't mediated through screens and through devices. I'm less able to look around in my world by way of signposts and perhaps even people. So that would be one small example of that kind of skill erosion.

What does skill erosion look like in sermon preparation? A skill that could potentially erode would be your ability to organize your message and to structure it. David, you're saying that maybe we need organizational help. My default wouldn't be how can an artificial intelligence program help, but can I seek help from a friend or teacher? Is this a skill that I can continue to pursue myself and hone rather than becoming increasingly reliant upon an artificial supplement?

Bordeleau: Isn't a Bible commentary a supplement?

Tinetti: That's a second thing that people will mention. AI supplements are tools, just like commentaries and dictionaries are tools. So, David, how would you compare and contrast AI as a tool versus a traditional book? Do you think that they're in the same category or is there something that's substantively different about the two of them?

Maxwell: Well, they have different strengths and weaknesses. One issue that comes up is bias. Books are all from a specific point of view. One of the advantages of AI is you can tell it what perspective to address. There's a little more flexibility. You can also ask follow-up questions that you can't ask a book. This is Plato's actual argument against writing, right? The reason that you shouldn't write things down, according to Plato, is because you can't ask questions of a written text. You can actually ask AI questions.

A weakness is that large language models, like AI, predict the most likely next word in a sentence. It doesn't even know if it's telling the truth. A human author is probably at least going to care whether they're telling you the truth, AI doesn't. I think you have to take the strengths and weaknesses into account if you're going to use it as a tool.

Tinetti: Right. I bristle about the argument that any tool is just neutral. And especially when we talk about the large language models and generative AI, this has been coded and created by folks who have a very particular perspective on the world. They're not, there isn't, as far as I know, somebody stroking a cat in Silicon Valley who's deciding for every particular search how it's going to go. Nevertheless, you're getting a kind of internet sausage. And you don't always know what's in it.

Maxwell: So those are two different things. The second one is more relevant. I think the goal is feeding it everything under the sun. The real issue is you're getting stuff taken from the internet.

It's not the AI creators' bias; it's the internet's bias. For example, I have been working on an article about the definition of the Council of Chalcedon, which is the early church council where we get the language of two natures in Christ. Where does that come from? I just asked ChatGPT to give me three different outlines for a possible article on this. It came back with cliches, and it wasn't helpful to me. I have a particular take on it that's not going to go with the typical view. Generally speaking, you're more likely to get cliches. You have to understand it's taking the data off the internet; what everyone else is saying about this. So, then the question becomes, is this helpful to you? It's part of discerning what you're dealing with, the nature of the tool that is important here.

Tinetti: Yeah, it's the nature of the tool and the job that you are trying to use it for. For the specific task of preparing to preach, I think that it proves to be woefully inadequate in many respects.

Maxwell: What are some examples of the ways we shouldn't use it?

Tinetti: I'm going to be preaching on Matthew 11. Why is this text good news for us? What's the function? What's the goal? What is the outcome for the hearers? It'd be very easy to have ChatGPT give a set of different focus and function statements. And that seems benign enough, because the text is

the text and what's the message we're going to get from it? However, you're not just reading the text itself. You're reading it conjoined with the people whom you are reading that text for and preparing to preach for. What is laid on your heart and in your mind as you are preparing are those specific people. You are wedding them together in your preparation, which of course no AI model is ever going to be able to do. For me, it's already shortcutting or cutting out essential elements of that relationship between pastor and people and text and occasion; that relationship is where the sermon really comes from.

Maxwell: I don't know. It's not obvious to me. If I ask for five outlines for a sermon on Matthew 11, and you look at the outlines, and have your people in mind, you're thinking about your people in relation to these five different outlines. It's not obvious to me that you've shortcut that relationship with the people.

Tinetti: Not just the relationship with the people, but your relationship with the text. So much of what I'm doing as a preacher in that preparation stage is wrestling with the scripture, with the Lord through that scripture, and praying back to him. My concern is that with a more generative kind of AI, it would be so natural for pastors to start relying upon it and asking it to do more and more.

If you can do it in a very circumscribed, disciplined sort of way, there could be benefits to it. Pastors are saints and sinners, and I want to put the best construction on all of us and assume that we would use AI in the best possible, most disciplined way. I'm afraid that both our understanding of human nature and experience in history attest that we're going to take shortcuts, and it could easily become much more than that.

Maxwell: But there're all kinds of tools that already exist. There are books of sermon illustrations, Bible commentaries that help you read the text more carefully, software that'll parse the verbs. Are you against all of these things?

Tinetti: I tend to be against more of these things than others are. It's one thing for me to read a commentary and to glean those insights, it's another thing for me to be outsourcing that to another thing. There are lines that need to be drawn somewhere. For me, the line before generative AI is one that's worth drawing, specifically when it comes to pastors preparing to preach. To the extent that I offload some of that work, I think that in the long run, it

might actually be deforming me as a preacher, as one who is himself being formed by that word so that I'm able to deliver it to the people of God.

Maxwell: Are you opposed to Logo software that has the Greek New Testament? You can hover over a word, and it'll tell you what the form of the word is and define it for you so that you don't have to look it up in a dictionary.

Tinetti: I think that's a useful tool and I'm not opposed to its existence. Do I personally use it? I don't.

Maxwell: I'm not saying that we should go back to the early church and not have concordances. What I'm saying is, a better approach would be to consider how we use it. Are there better or worse ways of using it? The fact that AI allows you to have a conversation with it makes it kind of fundamentally different than some of these other tools because it forces you into a conversation.

Tinetti: I am very hesitant and wary of the continued encroachment of new technologies, especially digital technologies that are seemingly degrading our need to rely upon one another, to rely upon our human faculties and on things that are apart from a screen. David, I think you've made some good points, and especially about the importance of being discerning with this.

Wendell Berry has an essay about why he wouldn't buy a computer. Somebody asked him where he would draw the line. He said it's a question worth losing some sleep over. He said he knows where to draw the line, but the fact of the matter is the line needs to be drawn somewhere. It's too easy to slip into: "Well, it's a tool. It has positives and negatives." That can't be an excuse for us not to be as thoughtful and discerning about its use. To quote Ian Malcolm from *Jurassic Park*, "They were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn't stop to think if they should." I think that's the question that we need to lose a little bit of sleep over. So not using generative AI in my preaching prep is where I draw the line. Wherever those lines are for you personally, you need to be deliberate about it because maybe there isn't a kind of bias in terms of the large language models, but there's a larger bias that this stuff would be frictionless and entering every aspect of our lives. Doggone better believe that that's coming for us. I think that we need to be a little bit more deliberate.

Bordeleau: Where's your line in the sand, Dr. Maxwell?

Maxwell: I guess I'm a little hesitant to draw it as strictly as Ryan wants to, because I'm not convinced. I haven't used AI enough to know what it's capable of.

Bordeleau: You have a better idea than most of us though, because of your work with neural network programming.

Maxwell: I have a very basic idea of how the thing works, but that doesn't mean I know the kind of capability it has. I don't actually know the various ways in which bias could creep into it.

Bordeleau: So, what would you use it for?

Maxwell: Well, in my view, you want to ask if you are using it in a way that sharpens your skills or dulls them. I wouldn't outsource all the work. I would use it as a brainstorming partner. I'd use it to critique the sermon with whatever criteria you're focusing on. Those sorts of things are okay. I'd even be okay to ask for five outlines just to see what it would come up with. I wouldn't just go with it. One of the central duties of being a pastor is preaching, so you presumably want to do that right. I mean, that's not something you outsource.

Tinetti: That's right. I mean, this is right at the heart of our office. This isn't even a discussion about the valid use of AI to collate addresses or prepare the church directory. I think there are other places where it could be helpful and useful. I'm not necessarily averse to it. But when it comes to the very heart of our work as pastors, preachers, and teachers of that kind of creative, generative, and Spirit-filled labor, I want that to be as analog as it can be; attendant to and reliant upon the Holy Spirit for myself, for the sake of my people.

Tom Long gives a good litmus test in his book *The Witness of Preaching*. It's in the context of plagiarism, but I think this applies to the use of AI. What would my people think if I told them that I was using this? If I told them that I'm using stories that I found from some subscription service, and that I didn't develop them myself, nor was I reliant upon a spirit-filled preacher and theologian? That this sermon is from some of that internet sausage that I got online?

Bordeleau: So, you'd be comfortable if a preacher or teacher read a sermon or used an outline or book from a person that they trusted?

Tinetti: Even in those cases, Tom Long's question forces us to ask if you'd be willing to share that with your people. Augustine talks about this in *On Christian Teaching*. In the fourth, fifth century AD, this was a problem. There were plenty of preachers who were unequipped for the task that was being laid upon them in terms of preaching. He acknowledged that some of them were not great preachers. He suggested that they memorize somebody else's sermon and deliver it. But he says to do so without deception. You need to own up to the fact that these are not my words; these are Augustine's or Ambroses or whomever, that I'm now delivering to you.

Bordeleau: So, what I hear you saying, Dr. Tinetti, is don't use AI at all; only use people and books. Am I correct?

Tinetti: Well, I'm not here to bind anyone's conscience about it. I would second what Dr. Maxwell is saying that if you're going to use it, be discerning, be disciplined, and have very specific ways in which you're using it. I would encourage that it be primarily limited to that first stage of preparing to preach, the discovery or invention stage where you're gathering materials. At that same point or afterwards, when you've done your work of reading the text and translating and thinking about the first impressions in a very specific targeted kind of way, I can see there being room for that. As for me, I'm veering away from that, but I'm not trying to lay down a new law for anybody. There's no question that you need to ask yourself, "Where is my line?"

Maxwell: My advice would be to use AI in ways that sharpen your skills. I wouldn't necessarily limit it to the first phase. I don't have a problem asking it for help organizing thoughts or help critiquing your sermon after you write it. I've never tried that, but I think that'd be a very interesting way to use it.

Bordeleau: The final question on our show is always this, what do you want our listeners to remember?

Tinetti: The poet Robert Frost said once, "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader." Not that every sermon is going to evoke tears from the people, but just the sense that the sermon comes through prayerfully wrestling

with the word. Where I am myself struck by it, receiving from the Lord, and it's out of the overflow of my heart that I'm able to speak to them.

Bordeleau: Dr. Maxwell, what do you want our listeners to remember?

Maxwell: That if you do use AI in sermon preparation, you use it in a way that helps you wrestle with God's word and not to avoid that wrestling.

Bordeleau: I'm definitely going to continue thinking about how this applies to teachers as they prepare for the classroom. I can see that both of you are passionate about writing good sermons. So, from the perspective of a person in the pew, thank you for taking that seriously!

Bordeleau: You can find more episodes of *Tangible* on all the major hosting apps, YouTube and as always on our website, concordiatheology.org. We have a lot of free resources there; check it out. I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. Join me next time when we talk about the intersection of theology and daily life, because it's tangible. Theology is learned and lived.

Reviews

**THE CULTURE OF GOD'S WORD:
Faithful Ministry in a Post-Christian
Society.** By Harold L. Senkbeil and
Lucas V. Woodford. Lexham Press, 2026.
159 pages. Paper. \$19.99.

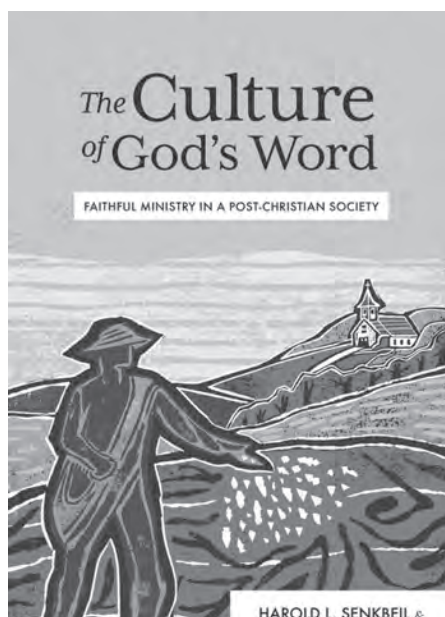
In an uncertain world where culture permeates so much of our life, including how we live and work, Senkbeil and Woodford argue that the word of Christ should drive the church's life and mission. Wary of modern approaches to contextualization, which lean toward cultural accommodation, *The Culture of God's Word* is a step toward reclaiming a biblical, practical guide to mission, modeled in Acts, where the word of Christ changes people's hearts and lives (xiv). This short book whets the appetite for a distinctly Lutheran reflection on pastoral ministry, ecclesiology, and faithful Christian witness in a post-Christian world.

The authors structure the book around the theme of the church, created, sustained, shaped, grown, and driven by the word of God. God's word "creates its own unique and transcendent culture that undergirds, shapes, and directs the mission and life of the holy Christian church on earth until Jesus comes again" (5). It "gathers people from every context into God's transcendent culture to bring them life for time and eternity" (23). Senkbeil and Woodford call this "acculturation," where people become "at home" in the "transcendent culture of God's transforming word" (43–44). They contend that the apostolic mission recorded in the book of Acts is the very

model of acculturation to the word of the gospel.

The church in Jerusalem is the mission template for Christians in every age. Acts 2:42 reminds us that God's word, the teaching of the apostles, was the heart and center of life for early Christians. The Spirit cultivates the culture of the word as the church proclaims the gospel. The Spirit works unity and fellowship in the church, nurtures her in the Lord's Supper, and even shapes her worship (47). What was true for early Christians remains true today.

What about contextualization? Here is where Senkbeil and Woodford may rock the boat of modern-day contextualists, who often make contextualization the driving paradigm of ministry. The authors do not dismiss the need for contextualization, but they set a firm boundary by calling for



“commonsense contextualization” (46). Once again, they point the reader to the apostles, who were sensitive to their social context, aware of pressures and trends, and used the vernacular of the people they evangelized (46) but never let the cultural context drive the mission. The word drives everything!

What does this mean? For one, worship is not the primary tool for cultural relevance. It’s where Christ is present with his people through Word and Sacrament. Worship is cultural in that it uses the languages and customs of human beings, but it also transcends cultural context. It is countercultural. It is otherworldly. “It is a unique culture set in motion by the word” (75). God’s presence and his word converge in the church’s historic liturgy, which maintains “a certain direction and flow: from God to us and back again” (88).

Worship is but one example of a word-generated culture, sown in “good soil” (125). Senkbeil and Woodford also emphasize catechesis, vocation, and hospitality as the other concrete ecclesial practices, rooted in God’s life-giving word and embodied in the life and mission of the church. Perhaps what is most helpful in the book is the biblically grounded sets of practical questions in chapter six concerning these fundamental areas. The questions address the proper use of technology, the integration of life-long catechesis, the blessing of marriage and family, working for the common good in community, and cultivating an environment of hospitality in home and church, among many others. They probe and examine current practices,

and challenge churches and individual Christians to explore faithful new ones using holy discernment.

As a former overseas missionary, chapter three stands out as a true gem. “Mission begins with the person of Jesus” (54). The authors remind us that Scripture places the forefront of the church’s mission in the very soul care that Jesus himself was about in his mission and ministry (53), which the apostles then continued. Christians are called to engage those who suffer. We pay careful attention to the people around us, seeking out the broken to bring Christ’s healing, just as Jesus himself did (66–67). This challenges us to grow “comfortable with the uncomfortable” (68), while at the same time rejoicing that our Lord has equipped his church for such a time as this (70).

One criticism of *The Culture of God’s Word* is its brevity, but perhaps that is also its greatest strength. The answer is simple: “Wherever the word is sown and takes root, it grows its own culture” (11). However, the practical implications of this are far from simple and deserve further development. But perhaps that’s what the authors are calling the church to faithfully discern. Above all, the book is a refreshing call for the church to trust our Lord and his Word, the very gift he has already given her. There is a place for programs, strategies, and methods, which the authors certainly admit, but the living and powerful Word of God that bore the church will sustain and grow her, just as it has from the beginning.

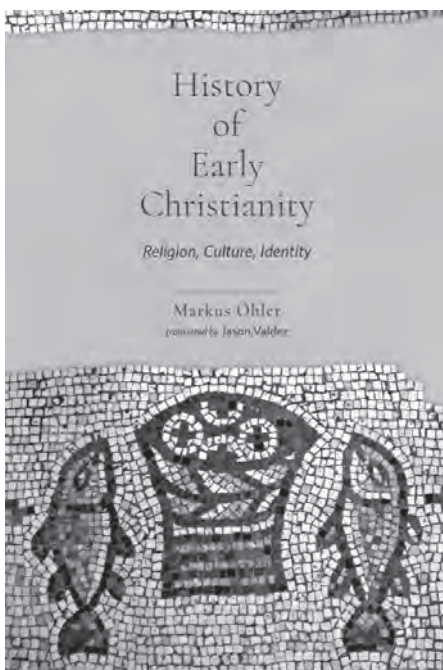
Joel Fritzsche

HISTORY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY:
Religion, Culture, Identity. By Markus
 Öhler. Translated by Jason Valdez.
 Baylor University Press, 2025. 321 pages.
 Softcover. \$49.99.

Early Christianity is an inviting, yet elusive area of study when approached from a historical point of view. The documents are not as abundant as we would like, nor are they as complete as one would hope. Any approach to the history of early Christianity is going to have to grapple with that paucity of sources and the geographical and chronological distance that makes historical reconstruction so difficult from an academic perspective.

Öhler, professor for New Testament Studies at the University of Vienna, Austria, is a historian in the German tradition who approaches his subject sympathetically but also critically. He offers what is meant to be an introductory textbook uncluttered by footnotes, built upon the work of previous critical scholarship. Normal tentative scholarly qualifications such as “probably” and “possibly” are also refreshingly lacking by design in order to provide a straightforward narration of the facts (xiii). His subject is the early Christianity of the first and early second centuries which he considers the era of the New Testament.

As one might expect then, his approach takes on a historical-critical approach (6) that often questions the historical veracity of the source documents that make up the New



Testament. Luke is often found in contradiction to some of the Pauline epistles and vice versa. Q is privileged as a source for the authentic sayings of Jesus, not all of Paul’s epistles were written by Paul, such as Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles, and other New Testament books are assumed to be later, such as Matthew and John, with Revelation written by an apocalypticist sometime in the early second century. Space does not allow for listing other problematic assertions, such as it is “doubtful that Jesus believed the wine became his blood” at the Last Supper “for it contradicts the ethos of Jewish meals, which ruled out the consumption of blood as a matter of course (93). He also asserts that the Eucharist itself was not associated with Christ by Christians

until the second century, insisting that the early Christians would have viewed it only as a memorial meal meant primarily for fellowship and remembrance (216). All of this disqualifies it as being used as a textbook among those who hold to the infallibility of Scripture and the integrity of the canon. The limits of a historical-critical approach that biases some sources and insists on evolutionary development of concepts over time are on full display.

As with almost any text, however, there were also discussions that proved quite illuminating from a historical point of view in providing a more nuanced approach to some disputed issues or historical conundrums. For instance, the discussion on Jewish descent being dependent on the mother's side is questioned with some interesting historical details that would seem to indicate that up until the second century it was paternity that determined descent (42–43). Öhler also sees no need to question that when Scripture refers to Jesus's family, it was referring to actual brothers and sisters (77). His excursus on *Christianoï* (Christianity) as the “state's designation of a political group,” while recognizing the term's usage in Christian texts, was intriguing and well argued (144).

He also demonstrates a keen and succinct understanding of the historical arguments for the North and South Galatian theories with Paul's missionary journey to that region, coming down on the side of the southern journey being the most plausible (189). I found his discussions on travel in the ancient world

to be quite enlightening as he weighed the options of sea travel versus land travel, and the dangers as well as benefits of both (179–182). Most beneficial were the opening chapters that dealt with the society and culture Christianity found itself in along with the religious milieu of pagan and Jewish religions at the time (chapters 2 and 3). The discussion of slavery in the New Testament era helps clarify that the status of slaves then should not be read through our modern views of slavery, noting that some slaves were actually better off economically and socially than some freedmen (17–18). His assertion that Hellenism was the dominant culture of the period is indebted to Harnack, although he does recognize some diversity in the chapter on Syrian Christianity.

I learned much from this textbook. The engagement with extrabiblical material throughout the text is one of its strengths in helping the reader situate Christianity within its social and cultural context. There is much useful and well researched material concerning Christianity's relation to Judaism, to other religions, and to Greco-Roman society and culture. However, I also found that many assertions that purported to be based on historical rigor, especially with regard to Scripture, were based on assumptions about texts and how texts work (such as dependence on sources and evolutionary development more generally) that have themselves been deconstructed in more recent biblical scholarship. This textbook, while inviting in many ways, ultimately

proved elusive in elucidating the history of early Christianity for those with a commitment to the inspired Scriptures.

Joel C. Elowsky

JESUS AND OTHER SONS OF GOD: Luke's Christology and Mediterranean Myth.

By Daniel B. Glover. Baylor University Press, 2025. 300 pages. Hardcover. \$64.99.

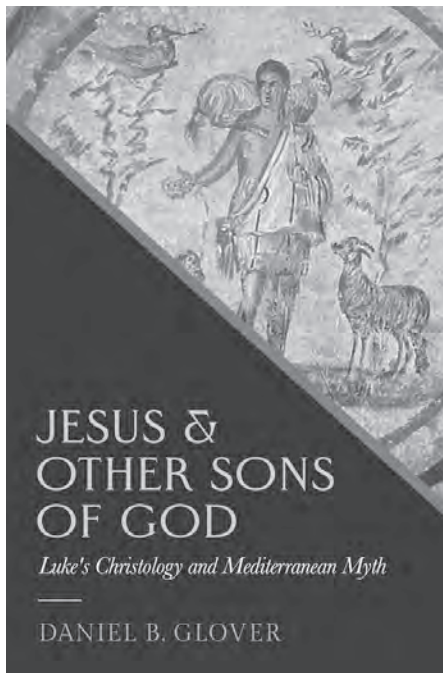
In what is in my estimation the most significant scholarly monograph on Lukan Christology in roughly twenty years, Daniel Glover argues that scholars have underappreciated the degree to which Luke's portrayal of Jesus engages with Greco-Roman ways of talking about gods, humans, and beings who blur the boundaries between them. Now, Glover should not be misunderstood. He is not at all arguing that Luke portrays Jesus as a mere hero or demigod and therefore not *really* God. Nor is he arguing that Luke has simply borrowed aspects of his story from Greco-Roman myths. Rather, Glover argues that Luke is creatively engaging with Greco-Roman tropes and assumptions about divine humans to say what he wants to say about Jesus. In particular, he argues that Luke is notable for applying so many different terms, tropes, and categories to Jesus such that he "depicts a Jesus whose divinity differs in both degree *and in kind* from other gods and sons of gods" (221).

In the first chapter Glover lays the groundwork by discussing how people in the ancient Mediterranean world thought about gods, humans, and the differences

between them. While some have argued that in Greco-Roman perspective divinity is merely a question of status rather than being, Glover argues that divinity is nearly always a question of *both* status and being. Thus, when Greco-Roman storytellers talk about humans becoming gods, whether this be ancient heroes or Roman emperors, the assumption is that these individuals are granted to ascend to a qualitatively different plane of being. There is no smooth gradient between gods and humans in the Greco-Roman imagination as is sometimes supposed. Glover's command of the primary sources is impressive. He is regularly backing up his claims with clear and extended examples from the relevant literature. Though this may grow tedious for some readers, the marshaling of such evidence is invaluable.

In the chapters that follow, Glover discusses how various aspects of Luke's presentation of Jesus interact with particular Greco-Roman tropes about divine humans. The second chapter looks at Luke's infancy narrative in comparison with stories of divine parentage. Glover affirms that Jesus's conception is substantially different from pagan stories of Olympian gods literally impregnating women, yet he points out that Luke is not the only Greek writer to be interested in divine parentage while also distancing his own presentation from these crudely literal examples. Glover's comparisons always seek to show *both* similarity and difference.

The third chapter situates the transfiguration of Jesus within other stories of divine epiphanies. Notably,



Glover maintains that this story helps make clear that Jesus cannot be understood to *become* divine at his resurrection, as has often been maintained by many Lukan scholars. In the fourth chapter, he argues that Luke's use of terms such as Lord (κύριος) and Savior (σωτήρ) should be understood not only in relation to the use of these terms in the Old Testament, but also in relation to the use of these terms for gods and divine rulers in the Greco-Roman world such as the Roman emperors.

The fifth chapter finally examines Jesus's resurrection and ascension as told in Luke's Gospel in comparison with consistent features of deification narratives of heroes. Glover argues that this has the effect of pointing

readers back to examining the kind of life that Jesus lived and the continued benefits that Jesus can bring to those who venerate him. The conclusion summarizes the discussion and offers a closing theological discussion of how to think through Jesus being portrayed similarly to Greco-Roman heroes, demigods, and divine rulers.

Readers should note that this book is not so much interested in proving or disproving that Luke portrays Jesus as divine so much as exploring *how* Luke portrays Jesus as a divine figure. In general, Glover is friendly toward orthodox Christology, but he is chiefly interested in exploring what Luke is saying within his own Greco-Roman context.

Glover's most lasting contribution is his demonstration that scholars should take seriously the Greco-Roman context of New Testament Christology. It has been fashionable for many decades to focus almost exclusively on the Jewish backgrounds for understanding New Testament Christology. There are many good reasons for this tendency. However, Glover is right that we cannot so cleanly separate Jewish and Greco-Roman backgrounds. It is undeniable that the particular presentation of Jesus in Luke and Acts is both influenced by and seeks to influence Greco-Roman notions of gods and humans.

That being said, Glover's discussion of the cultural backgrounds of Luke's presentations is still a bit one sided. It is true that this focus offers a helpful corrective, but I was left wondering how Glover might guide us in thinking about

the relationship between Jewish and Greco-Roman backgrounds in Luke's christological presentation. I agree with Glover that Jewish and Greco-Roman backgrounds are not in competition with one another; Luke's presentation being more Greco-Roman need not make it less Jewish. Nevertheless, does Glover's presentation offer a corrective to more recent attempts to read Luke and Acts "within Judaism"? I would have appreciated a clearer answer to these and related questions.

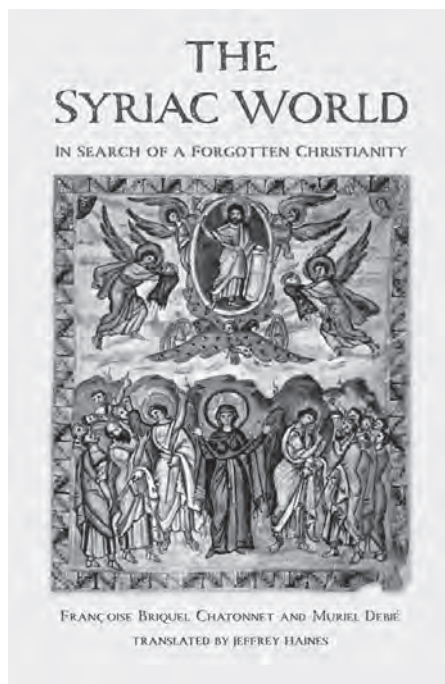
Nevertheless, anyone interested in Luke's Gospel's Greco-Roman context or New Testament Christology more generally would do well to pay attention to Glover's carefully argued and meticulously researched treatment.

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THE SYRIAC WORLD: In Search of a Forgotten Christianity. By *Françoise Briquel Chatonnet and Muriel Debié*, translated by *Jeffrey Haines*. Yale University Press, 2023. 285 pages. \$35.00.

The libraries of Lutheran congregations and pastors' studies is frequently peppered with the patristic series, originally edited by Philipp Schaff, Ante-Nicene, Nicene, and Post-Nicene Fathers. Although a slim volume includes contributions by Syriac authors, and some apocryphal works are represented, nevertheless these contributions stand at the periphery of a series that undoubtedly skews Greco-

Latin.¹ Although there have been a few Lutheran figures that have passed by the linguistic horizon—Johann Gerhard in the seventeenth century and Carl Friedrich Keil come to mind, though undoubtedly there were others—for the most part the Syriac dialect itself has been beyond the pale of linguistic preparation at Lutheran institutions. The Syriac world, then, in many respects, occupies a space beyond our horizon. Nevertheless, as our contemporary world is reshaped, Western Christians find themselves in a pluralistic situation like that of ancient Eastern European and near Eastern Christians. It is well for us to examine what lies beyond the boundary markers, and to learn how ancient Christians



shared such a space, conducted missions, preached and catechized, and learned to survive in a world very much not their own. Whatever theological concerns Lutheran Christians may well have concerning the dogmatic differences between these ancient Syriac Christian communities and our own, such a peripheral treatment undoubtedly leaves out important information in our picture and understanding of the history of the church.

Into these lacunae of basic information enters *The Syriac World*, apply subtitled *In Search of a Forgotten Christianity*. This volume, a translation of Françoise Briquel Chatonnet and Muriel Debié's *Le Monde Syriaque* (2017), navigates between the scholarly technicality of so much written of historical Syriac Christianity, and generic encyclopedia information that can be gleaned online. As such, it would be a helpful introductory primer for all students of church history who do not want overly technical monographs, but who want more information than a Wikipedia article. The volume covers this ancient Christian group by describing its historical/linguistic setting (chapter 1), the development of Christianity up the fourth century (chapter 2), the distinctive literary and poetic culture that flourished amongst the Syriac churches under Roman, Persian, and later Islamic dominion (chapter 4). The second half of the volume covers the missionary efforts and expansion into Asiatic territory of the Syriac churches (chapters 5–7), a survey

of the engagement the eastern Syriac Church has had with the West and finally concludes with the recollection of the diaspora that many Syriac Christians have suffered in the last century and which continues down into the present. This ongoing reality alone should spur those of us in the West to learn of the world of those whose ancient ecclesiastical homes have been lost.

In general, two features of the volume greatly enhance the reader's reception of this foreign world. The first is the extensive use of quotation from a diverse range of sources. The second is the plenitude of pictures of manuscripts, maps, and mosaics. The quotations allow the reader to peer into the mind of many of the figures that are introduced in the volume. It is not unusual to meet in the center of the page the poetry of Ephrem the Syrian, or the theological reflection of Jacob of Serugh (see for instance, page 101), long before one learns of his biographical details (150). The visual tour allows the viewer a glimpse of the artistry and peculiar aesthetic taste of the Syriac world, while at the same time allowing one to see the way it develops, particularly in the script of the language.

One intriguing gleanings that is apparent from the volume is that Syriac theology was not monolithic, and both underwent great change across time, and even developed diverse theological traditions in close proximity to one another. One of the earliest theological tracts known to us, ostensibly by a figure named Bardaisan (c.a. AD 154–212), called the *Dialogue on Fate/Laws of the*

Countries intimated that the material world was coeternal with God (37–38)! The authors also suggest a connection to the various strands of Gnosticism and Valentinianism. Yet by the time of Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), the theological framework of the Syriac tradition has changed quite a great deal, such that Ephrem penned his own cycle of poems against Bardaisan, along with Marcion and Mani. Orthodoxy is not a guaranteed inheritance, but something to strive and struggle towards. This theological diversity continued to find expression in the conflicts around Chalcedon and the difficulty of translating Syriac terminology and theology into other languages, especially when technical terms were involved. The result was ecclesiastical divisions that endured for centuries. The Miaphysite branch of the Syriac Church and the East Syrian Church that held its loyalty to Nestorius, and of equal significance, Theodore of Mopseustia.

Nor was theological discourse limited to inter-confessional strife. Indeed, one of the major offerings of the Syriac Church is that it illustrates how Christians in a competitive—and sometimes hostile—religious environment defended themselves. Such apologetics took place not only through geopolitics, but also through formal dialogue and disputation (171). At the same time, Syriac Christians were accustomed to dealing with the tension of living on the borderland between two empires—the Byzantine and the Arabo-Muslim—and therefore

two distinct religious/cultural contexts (181). Despite the deft character of these hardy Christian groups, this situation was hardly stable, and large-scale emigration took place during times of intense persecution, such as the Armenian Genocide (AD 1915). This reality continues today. The volume closes with the sober acknowledgment of the outsized role that the emigrant churches, publishing houses, and the like play in the preservation of Syriac story, culture, and language. That story, its lessons, and its warnings, deserves our close attention.

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1. Schaff's own *History of the Christian Church* contains only scattered references to individual figures and movements that might be called eastern or Syriac Christianity. His introduction to the "Nestorians" says enough of his perception of these peoples. "While most of the heresies of antiquity, Arianism not excepted, have been utterly obliterated from history, and only raise their heads from time to time as individual opinions under peculiar modifications, the christological heresies of the fifth century, Nestorianism and Monophysitism, continue in organized sects to this day. These schismatic churches of the East are the petrified remains or ruins of important chapters in the history of the ancient church. They are sunk in ignorance and superstition . . ." (3:730). Likewise in Jaroslav Pelikan's third volume of *The Christian Tradition*, "the Spirit of Eastern Christendom" Christendom must be taken principally to the Western Church, which has as its eastern component Greek-speaking Constantinople. The "Monophysites" receive a summary mention (pp. 49–61), but this depiction is colored by Greek controversies, and the mosaic concludes there.



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