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Inside the Issue

When we set out to publish an issue on "Faith and Culture," we knew the contributions might be diverse in scope and content. I'm excited to say this may be the most eclectic set of essays I have read in *Lutheran Mission Matters*, or in other journals, for that matter. From the graphic novel to the movie theater, from the Confessions to consumerism, from the academy to the arts, with deep dives into anthropology and sociology, culture is widely represented in this issue. Yet, there are certainly aspects of culture that remain merely implied in this issue, fertile ground for you, the reader, to interpret and apply.

Robert Kolb has supplied us with a foundational essay on the Lutheran engagement of culture. He references Niebuhr and other renown scholars who posit various definitions of "culture" and various ways the church might engage cultures. My own contribution on postmodernism is intended to extend this conversation, offering the reader tools to actively engage and maybe even embrace aspects of a postmodern perspective. Further into the issue, scholars offer us glimpses of the intersection of faith and culture from their areas of expertise: Jack Schultz on anthropology, Matt Borrasso on critical race theory, Christian Einertson on the Confessions, Will Fredstrom on consumerism, Ben Leeper on graphic novels, Jeffrey Skopak on cinema, and Lori Doyle and Jill Swisher on vocation. Herb Hoefer adds nuance to the conversation by taking us to India and sharing his experience of the Gospel's unique relevance in that context. Finally, the issue concludes with another novel contribution—an interview with FLAME, a renown Christian hip-hop artist and Lutheran theologian.

Embedded in each of these articles are principles that can be applied to a myriad of cultural contexts. However, the texts here are descriptive, not prescriptive. As this issue's call for papers suggested, there is no *acultural Christianity*. Christianity has and always will interact with diverse cultures in various times and places. In this issue, we offer a few glimpses of this process.

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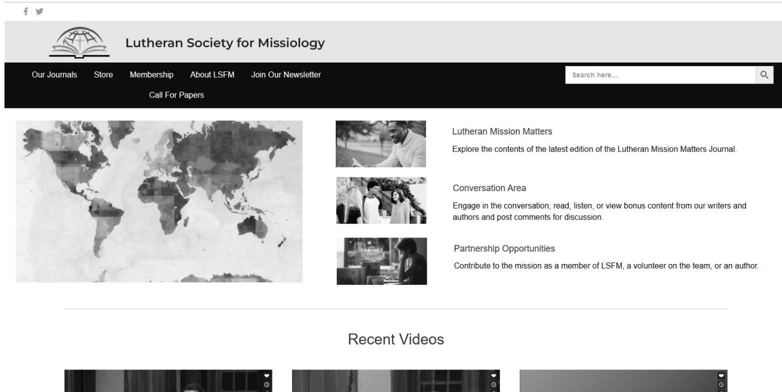

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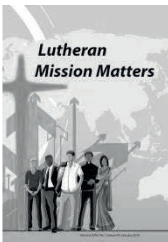

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Articles

A Lutheran View of Culture

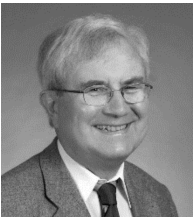
Robert Kolb

God breathed into the dust of the earth and fashioned His human creature for life on this earth. Time and place formed an integral element of the product of His creative breath. He gave Adam and Eve dominion of the kind He exercises, dominion of service and care, in His world to those whom He had created in His own image. He created them to manage and serve His creation in certain places at certain times.

The Creator had an appointment at a specific time—in the cool of the evening—in a specific place—somewhere in the Garden. The failure of Adam and Eve to be *there then* induced God to make the first evangelism call: "Where are you?" Ever since then, throughout the God-designed and God-governed passage of time and in every place in His creation, God has accompanied His human creatures, seeking them, calling them back to Himself. He has related to them in wrath and judgment as well as in the re-creative expression of His mercy and lovingkindness in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In every historical circumstance, the unchanging God is present, governing and guiding the ever-changing course of human history as it unfolds the blessings that the Creator designs for the people whom He seeks out in their own cultures throughout time around the globe. He gathers them from all nations into His family, the Church. Throughout, He continues to provide for His creation and protect His human creatures in the face of all evil.

The Biblical Origins of Cultures

As history moved east of Eden, God responded to human need with the development of specific cultural gifts in specific times and specific places. Some people, such as Jabal, were called to practice agriculture (Gen 4:20); others, Jubal for instance, developed musical arts (Gen 4:21); and Tubal-cain made tools, the machinery of that time (Gen 4:22). God had developed human culture before Babel



Dr. Robert Kolb is a professor emeritus of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He is also an editor of Lutheran Mission Matters.

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added the further dimension of different languages as punishment for sin. These elements of culture formed part of the phenomenon "culture." We may define "culture" as the organic (that is, composed of mutually related elements) whole of human activities and relationships which define the meaning and significance of life for a specific group of people, who are linked by these elements in a common identity and in common endeavors. "Culture" presumes shared assumptions, values, and allegiances, and it involves systems, institutions, individuals. Cultures embrace a number of aspects: language and literature; social structures and relationships; economic relationships; political institutions; sports, leisure, recreation; music and the graphic arts; natural sciences and technology; health care; media; military service; educational systems; festivals, including public and individual rites of passage; practices regarding death, burial, and interactions with the dead; humor; transportation; and others. The judgment upon human presumptuousness that the tower of Babel brought upon humankind determined an important element of human cultures, but the multiple aspects of culture also reflect the ultimate variety of the ultimately simple nature of our Creator.

Differing cultures developed as time moved along and human beings spread across the earth. In each culture, holding the culture together for the benefit of at least some of the population became an ultimate goal, edging the Creator to the side. In one or perhaps more cultures, the idea of building a tower to express human power, a false use of the dominion God had given for interaction with the rest of creation, aroused God's wrath. Languages divided the one human race even though language remains the prime tool for praising God and praying to Him. God separated cultures from each other through language barriers. But He provided possibilities for translation. And His desire to restore and renew the conversations of Eden remained. Even under the curse, the variety of cultures illustrates the richness of the image of God, in whose image human beings were fashioned.

H. Richard Niebuhr's "Christ and Culture in Paradox"

In 1950, Yale professor H. Richard Niebuhr delivered five lectures on the relationship of "Christ and culture," in which he sketched five different approaches to the relationship between the Church and the cultures in which it has lived. Both Reformation-era Anabaptists and medieval monastics typify the attitude of "Christ against culture," the withdrawal from culture practiced by many who find it difficult to cope with living in cultures that do not promote the Church or make its life easy. It stands in contrast to the "Christ of culture" motif, which describes the subjection of the Church's message to cultural values. Examples range from the Liberal Protestantism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the "German Christians" and other ecclesiastical expressions of culture in modern dictatorships, to the "American Christianity" that integrates a wide spectrum of political views, all of

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them valuing "personal freedom" of one kind or another over genuine biblical expressions of love for God and others. Between these two lie "Christ above culture" and "Christ transforming culture." Those who embrace the "Christ above culture" view embrace the goodness of culture but believe that the Church brings the fulfillment of its values to their highest level. Niebuhr preferred the "Christ transforming culture" motif and argued for the Christian's obligation to permeate the culture with Christian values. Finally, he labeled the view of Saint Paul, Marcion, Martin Luther, and Niebuhr's brother Reinhold, as "Christ and culture in paradox."[1]

Labeling Luther's approach to culture a "paradox" indicates a failure to understand the reformer's distinction of the two realms into which God has placed human beings: their horizontal relationships with this world and their vertical relationship with their Creator or some substitute that they have designed for Him. The label also fails to recognize his perception that believers, as they participate in the cultures to which God has called them, are sinful and righteous at the same time. Luther's robust doctrines of creation and providence, illustrated in his explanation of the first article of the Creed and the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer,[2] lead his followers to a high appreciation of God's gifts in and through their cultures. That high appreciation integrates easily with a calling to criticize cultural diversions from God's will whenever cultural values contradict or undermine the practice of true human living as revealed in conscience (Rom 2:14) and Scripture. It is natural for human beings to criticize the flaws in those they love, with sympathy and hope for change. It is natural for human beings to love those whom they criticize because God favors our treating all those within our spheres with respect for each person's inherent dignity and worth—the same kind of respect that we would like to enjoy ourselves.[3]

Martin Luther's Appreciation and Critique of His Culture

Luther himself demonstrated an appreciation for his own culture based on his belief that God gives good gifts in and through culture. His gratitude for technological advances revealed itself above all in his use of the printing press.[4] The careful cultivation of rhetorical theory and skills of his colleague Philip Melanchthon aided Luther's own production of both powerful oral testimony in lectures and sermons as well as written works in several genres that spread his message across German-speaking lands and beyond.[5] His colleagues in the arts faculty of the University of Wittenberg made a wide range of contributions to their respective disciplines, including astronomy, botany, history, and Late Greek and Latin poetry. This reflected the understanding of the "dominion" that God gave his human creatures in Genesis 1:28 as a lordship of care and cultivation that promoted human knowledge and welfare and thus gave glory to God.[6] Luther's active use of and gratitude for the musical arts[7] and the graphic arts[8] cultivated important aspects of civil society as well as the life of the church.

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At the same time, Luther criticized elements of his cultural surroundings when they departed from God's will. His criticism of distant princes, such as Duke Heinrich the Younger of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, Duke Georg of Saxony, or King Henry VIII of England, may seem safe enough since he enjoyed the protection of his own princes.[9] But his calling Saxon courtiers in his Wittenberg congregation to repentance for social injustices that they visited upon the peasants and townsmen[10] and his telling his students that even his good friend Elector Johann Friedrich should change practices in specific instances reveal his critical stance against injustice and wastefulness that he witnessed in his own government.[11] His *Open Letter to the German Nobility* of 1520 concluded with a critique of German civic life. Luther called for an end to "extravagant and costly dress," the spice traffic, usury, excessive eating and drinking, and brothels.[12] In the preface of the Smalcald Articles, composed in 1538, he expressed his vexation over several elements of his culture:

> There is disunity among the princes and the estates. Greed and usury have burst in like a great flood and have attained a semblance of legality. Wantonness, lewdness, extravagant dress, gluttony, gambling, conspicuous consumption with all kinds of vice and wickedness, disobedience—of subjects, servants, laborers—extortion by all the artisans and the peasants (who can list everything!) have so gained the upper hand that a person could not set things right again with ten councils and twenty imperial diets.[13]

Not at all paradoxical, Luther's appreciation of God's gift of the German and wider European culture into which he had been born included his critique of its failure to be godly.

Lutheran Appreciation of and Contributions to Culture through the Ages

Luther's followers in his own time and subsequently have participated in their cultures, both enjoying the blessings that each culture provides, contributing to these cultures, and criticizing abuses of God's order and will for human society and individual action. Contributions to music by Johann Sebastian Bach, Heinrich Schütz, and others reflected their faith in music for both ecclesiastical and secular settings. Danish theologian Nikolaus Grundtvig introduced important innovations in popular education and other social measures. The German-Russian pastor Heinrich Wilhelm Dieckhoff campaigned for basic education of the blind and the deaf in Tsarist Russia, with the aid of the imperial court. The Lutheran pastor Josef Miloslav Hurban (1817–1888) and the Lutheran layman L'udovit Štur (1815–1856) built upon their secondary education in Lutheran schools as they led the movement to organize analysis and structuring of modern Slovak.[14] William Foege (b.1936), medical missionary for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod before he went to the United States Center for Disease Control, led efforts to eradicate smallpox in Africa. Many other examples

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demonstrate that Lutherans have actively participated in the public arenas of their cultures and contributed their gifts to these cultures.

Lutheran Critique of the Ills of Society

On the other hand, beginning with Luther himself, Lutherans have practiced sharp critique of societal abuse and social injustice. As the threats of Emperor Charles V to eradicate the Wittenberg reform grew more menacing, Luther developed a justification of resistance to governmental authorities by those with responsibilities for public order and welfare under them, based on his understanding of God's calling for rulers to execute God's will and not seek their own benefit. When the imperial armies defeated the leaders of the Lutheran movement in the Smalcald War, a band of Luther's most devoted disciples published a "Confession" in Magdeburg that reaffirmed allegiance to the Augsburg Confession and justified the right of their city to resist the imperial religious law, the "Augsburg Interim." Paul Gerhardt's defiance of the efforts to unite Lutheran and Reformed churches in the seventeenth century and also later Lutheran leaders' resistance to religious and political tyranny counter the many instances of Lutherans submitting to or even supporting exploitation and oppression in various forms. For instance, an active Lutheran layman, Louis Kossuth, led the Hungarian rebellion against the House of Habsburg in 1848–1850 and spent subsequent years in exile. Among the first to argue that one could not be Christian and embrace either the positive racism of National Socialism or its negative racism against the Jews and others, was Hermann Sasse, a stalwart defender of the integrity of Luther's theology. Along with his friend Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others, Sasse continued his resistance to the National Socialist regime. In Norway, Bishop Einar Berggrav voiced the same opposition to the occupation of his land by forces of the Third Reich. In Communist lands, Hungarian bishop Lajos Ordass earned imprisonment with his rejection of the Soviet-sponsored government in the 1950s. These examples and many others demonstrate two connected Lutheran principles: a high appreciation for the gifts their Creator gives them through the cultures into which He calls them and the importance of critiquing offenses against God's will in both the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of life.[15]

Called to Translate God's Word at Home and Abroad

Christian theology has always taken God's Word as His means to continue the Edenic conversation in Scripture. The Holy Spirit brings this Word to expression in cultures around the world and throughout time. The Christian message is not an abstract philosophy but a concrete communication from the God of conversation and

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community. He seeks to enter into an exchange with every human. Jesus sent His church to every nation and people, to every culture. The Yale missiologist Lamin Sanneh, a convert in his youth from Islam, has pointed out that the Christian faith, in contrast to the religion of the Qur'an, translates by its very nature.[16] The Lord who translated Himself into human flesh and blood has given us His words not in His native Aramaic but in a Greek translation. When believers bring the message of Christ to those outside the faith, they begin by learning the language. They listen to the rhythms, tones, and melodies of those with whom they are trying to communicate, whether it be their own children who need instruction in the faith or strangers with whom they are enjoying their first encounter. God has always made His presence felt in one way or another in every cultural setting. Such cultural conversations always leave some impact—set some waves in motion—in the culture to which it comes. But in the translation of the message into a different culture, believers face the challenge of bowing to certain native concepts or modes of thought that contradict the biblical way of perceiving reality. Therefore, believers couple their high appreciation for God's gifts in their culture with a sharply critical stance toward the culture's divergences from God's plan for His human creatures and His call for justice and mercy among all people.

In the context of both appreciation and critique, Lutherans recognize the necessity of confessing their faith and their insights into God's Word by translating its message into the local place and time into which God has called them. Lamin Sanneh's insight into the nature of the biblical faith as a translatable faith—in contrast to Islam—is extended in reports from a workshop led by Michael DeJong, University of South Florida, and Christian Tietz, University of Zurich. They note that God's revelation in Scripture compels all followers of Christ, from Paul on Mars Hill to the twenty-first century witnesses of the crucified and risen Jesus, to translate the message of the prophets and apostles into their own languages and cultural settings. DeJonge and Tietz argue that common human experiences among uniquely cultural-bound situations are sufficiently similar, making translation possible. They further argue that the way God operates in history and respects the cultures that He governs makes translation necessary. The Gospel of Jesus Christ makes itself a refuge for people across the globe; God sent His Son as Savior for all. God's designs and works throughout history make "linguistic-historical contextualization" both doable and obligatory for believers. Ultimate authority for the followers of Christ lies in what God has done historically and as reported in Holy Scripture. The Holy Spirit calls Christians to render the promise of Christ from one field of meaning to another. They do so even within their own languages, as time and events give words new shades of meaning. Historically distinct situations can find a linking bridge in the "historical transplantation of ideas and experiences" (which are always related).[17] DeJonge and Tietz note that, as linguist George Steiner has argued, something is generally lost in

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translation, but they further note that something is usually gained as well. The gain comes not by changing the content of God's message but by making the promises of Scripture clear in different situations than those of ancient Palestine and the Hellenistic world. For in God's economy, He has placed in Scripture words of Law and Gospel that address lives in settings far different from those of Isaiah or Luke.

The joys, opportunities, challenges, and dangers of such transcultural conversations offer us today the opening to think about God's calling for us to bring His message to the next generation in our land, to the neighbors in our own vicinity, and to the world beyond through the many ways God makes global communication possible. God brought His message to those far away once through pen pals; today, various technological channels pose their own invitations and challenges for witnessing. Both near and far, sinners need God's Word. His Word addresses the basic human condition through the agricultural society of the ancient Hebrews and the metropolitan cultures of the Hellenistic world. Thus, as Christians, we are called to repeat the Gospel of Christ in the language of every individual place and time in God's cornucopia of human settings. As Luther said, the Holy Spirit needs all believers to serve as His instruments for uttering the Gospel understandably wherever God has placed them—for cultures deliver God's providential care and love in many forms. Among them is the privilege of conveying His will and promise whenever and wherever He has placed us.

Endnotes

[1] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).
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[11] WA 44:451, 40–452, 5; LW 7:206.
[12] WA 6:465, 25–467, 26; LW 44:212–15.
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[14] Robert Kolb, "The Polis in Luther's Theology," in *Theology and Ethics for the Public Church: Mission in the 21st century*, ed. Mary Sue Dreyer and Samuel Deressa (Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, forthcoming).
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[16] Lamin Sennah, *Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009).
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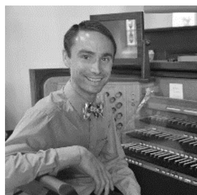
Postmodernism and Mission

James Marriott

In my experience teaching in Lutheran academic institutions over the last decade, talk about postmodernism rarely fails to elicit a response. The responses, though, are varied. Some reject postmodernism outright, decrying the propensity for relativism as an affront to the Gospel and to our society.[1] For these students, I have tried to gently probe their posture, asking them what exactly they are rejecting, or, more importantly, by what method are they facilitating that rejection (how postmodern of me, I know). Others accept postmodernism rather holistically, embracing its central tenets uncritically and spiraling deeper and deeper into deconstructed identities, whether spiritual, ecclesial, or cultural. Ambiguity, for these students, becomes a captor rather than a liberator. For these students, I have tried to gently pump the brakes, as one does while driving on icy roads with poor traction. Other students, often the ones most educated in philosophy and anthropology, maintain a more nuanced and balanced approach to postmodernism. In this essay, I hope to offer the reader some of my own thoughts and research, closely mirroring what I have taught, seen, and learned from these students who hold this balanced, nuanced approach. This approach is a keen tool for the mission field, as throughout my teaching and ministry career I have witnessed this approach being applied in the pulpit, the choir loft, the classroom, the theater stage, the basketball court, on social media, and in many other places of cultural engagement.

Postmodern Understandings of Culture

"Postmodernism" is a very handy term, used to describe art, architecture, literature, and philosophy. But for thinking about the Church's mission, postmodernism as a *cultural condition* is of the greatest interest. The very term "postmodernism" indicates that it is "post-" or "after" something called "modernism,"



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and that to understand "postmodernism" we need also a grasp of what is meant by "modern." Generally, various cultural theorists have assessed the last millennia of Western cultural development and practice in three broad categories: pre-modern, modern, and postmodern. The pre-modern understanding of culture is that of "a visible, comprehensible entity, the conscious creation of rational minds. It is the sum total of the spiritual, intellectual, and aesthetic aspects of human society."[2] This pre-modern conceptualization is evident in the context of colonialization, where Eurocentric communities brought "culture" to those who were "uncivilized." Culture in this sense is something to be attained—you either have it, or you don't. Modernity, a product of the Enlightenment era, offered a more refined definition of culture: "[Culture] comprises those human attributes that are learned and learnable and are therefore passed on socially and mentally rather than biologically. Culture is in some sense a 'complex whole;' unity and harmony are key assumptions."[3] Thus, in a cultural construct that values order and homogeneity, modernity is something that neatly compartmentalizes. Here, culture is less something to be attained and more something to be assumed—one assumes (or is assumed to be part of) a particular cultural construct that is distinct from other cultural constructs. Your culture is, in modernity, one among many. Postmodernism, which has emerged over the last century and is still influential today, makes no such assumptions. Postmodernism deconstructs this tightly formed cultural framework of modernity in favor of a more porous, fragmented, and diverse cultural identity, as Arbuckle describes with this series of statements:

> Culture is not an entity, but a process of becoming;
> definitions of culture must be examined to uncover hidden assumptions of political, gender, or ideological power by authors;
> no observer is able to achieve a totally objective view of a culture;
> no one definition of culture can capture the complexity of a culture;
> globalization means that borders between cultures are softening;
> because people belong to a particular culture does not mean that they must act in predictable ways.[4]

No longer can we say that people "have a culture," because we exist in the midst of, respond to, use, and create cultural symbols.[5]

These statements reflect an evolution in the understanding of culture. A modern understanding expects that culture could distinguish one society from another. A postmodern understanding expects that any assessment of a culture must reflect the actual context of that culture. A modern understanding of culture tends to treat people as largely formed and shaped by the same influences. A postmodern understanding of culture presupposes that a unique variety of influences forms and shapes each person in a context. At the unavoidable risk of oversimplifying matters, the differences between the modern and postmodern understandings are illustrated in Figure 1.

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	Modern	**Postmodern**
Internal	homogeneous	fragmented
Borders	closed	porous
Identity	essentialist	multiple
Metaphor	order	chaos
Place	territorial	"translocal"
Dissenters	marginalized	integrated
Other cultures	inferior	interdependent
Power	hegemonic	contested

Fig. 1. Distinctions between modern and postmodern understandings. (This chart was recreated for this article and originally published in Gerald Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians: A Postmodern Critique* [Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010], 5.)

Certain integrated aspects of postmodernism are especially pertinent to this essay: an embrace of ambiguity, the process of deconstruction based on a hermeneutic of suspicion, the human experience as foundation for knowledge and reality, and the fusion of various hermeneutical perspectives in the pursuit of meaning.

Ambiguity

While modernity strove to empirically and methodologically provide definite structure and meaning to all aspects of reality, "postmodernism has come to embrace ambiguity in its rejection of sure and absolute foundations for human knowledge."[6] Ambiguity is, to borrow Edwards's assessment of normal nihilism, simply "the way the world comes to us."[7] Melanie Ross affirms this, suggesting that "ambiguity is our very condition. We cannot deny its existence; we may as well learn to live with it, and even enjoy it."[8] Thus, postmodernism thrives on the ambiguity that is inherent in almost everything.[9] As my friend and colleague Joel Okamoto recently suggested to me, "No one is converted to postmodern ambiguity; everyone is submerged in it." He

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went on to say that some *embrace* this ambiguity, others reject it, and still others seek to faithfully negotiate it by acknowledging ambiguity with humility and caution.

To avoid unnecessary ambiguity here, three interrelated *ambiguities* must be established: a metaphysical ambiguity, a cultural ambiguity, and a hermeneutical ambiguity. English theologian Ruth Page identifies ambiguity as a "*metaphysical* reality," meaning that the very structure and order of creation is an ambiguous balance between order and chaos.[10] This fundamental sense of ambiguity is foreign and even threatening to the modern person, who seeks clarity and structure, measurables and universals.[11] Ambiguity, however, does not imply a lack or absence of meaning; rather, ambiguity allows for a multiplicity of meaning.[12]

Peter Phan helps to illustrate the cultural ambiguity that conditions the relationship between postmodernism and inculturation in Western cultural contexts. Phan notes that postmodernism "refers to the cultural and social shift that has emerged since the 1930s and has been making its way from the West to the other parts of the world through the process of globalization."[13] The expression of postmodernism progressed through a variety of cultural forms throughout the twentieth century, including architecture, the arts, literature, philosophy, theology, and eventually the popular culture as a whole.[14] In consonance with that which was noted above, Phan suggests that postmodernism "rejects the stylistic integrity and 'purity' of modernity and embraces 'multivalence' and heterogeneity. It favors the technique of juxtaposition which assembles cheek by jowl seemingly contradictory styles of diverse origins."[15]

Phan identifies the relationship of television and film with the ambiguity of postmodernism. He suggests that film is the realm where "truth and fiction merge," in both juxtaposition and creative expression.[16] Additionally, television "brings the postmodern ethos of the film world into the living room and day-to-day life."[17] Especially with regard to live TV coverage,

> the world as presented by television, with its interpretation, commentary, and editing—often with bias—becomes the real world for most people, and consequently, what is not presented on television does not appear real to them . . . Furthermore, juxtaposing serious news with commercials and sitcoms and docudramas, television, like other postmodern artistic expressions, blurs the boundaries between truth and fiction, between the important and the trivial.[18]

From a perspective of community engagement and practice, Phan comments that the main characteristics of postmodernism are pessimism, holism, communitarianism, and relativistic pluralism:

> Pessimistic, because postmodernism abandons the Enlightenment myth of inevitable progress and highlights the fragility of human existence; holistic, in so far as it rejects the modern privileging of rationality and celebrates emotions and intuition; communitarian because it eschews modernity's individualism and its quest for universal, supracultural, and timeless truth, and emphasizes the role of the community in creating the truth;

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> and relativistic and pluralistic, because there being many different human communities, there are necessarily many different truths.[19]

Additionally, postmodern society is predicated on a hermeneutical ambiguity rather than the supposed objective reality of modernity. Phan suggests that "what we call the 'real world' is, for postmodernism, nothing more than our ever-shifting social creation. Ours is a 'symbolic' world which we create through our common language. Hence, knowledge is replaced by interpretation."[20] This hermeneutical subjectivity is influenced not only on societal practice, whether through the influences of media, art, music, etc., but also within the inherent power dynamics that condition those very practices. To this end, Phan notes the importance of power dynamics in "the shaping of cultural identity," suggesting that "in the past, anthropologists tended to regard culture as an innocent set of conventions rather than a reality of conflict in which the colonizers, the powerful, the wealthy, the victors, the dominant can obliterate the beliefs and values of the colonized, the weak, and the poor."[21]

These three ambiguities—metaphysical, cultural, and hermeneutical—condition postmodernism's engagement with epistemology and scholarship, liberal arts and social sciences, pop culture and media, and just about every other identifiable marker of Western society. Furthermore, these three ambiguities structure (so to speak) the postmodern project of deconstruction.[22]

Deconstruction

Deconstruction is a process of interpretation and analysis that dismantles the "face-value" of an argument in an effort to glean a more nuanced understanding. Despite the possible polemical posture of this notion, the goal is not *destruction*, but rather deconstruction and reconstruction that ultimately strengthens an argument, even if the methodology requires vulnerability and humility of both the speaker and the interpreter.

In *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, James K. A. Smith takes "Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church," meaning he works to connect Christianity to postmodernism's project of deconstruction.[23] His purpose is to help the Church discover its identity and voice as it navigates the transitions between modernity and postmodernism.

Smith uses Jacques Derrida to illustrate the hermeneutics of suspicion that condition postmodern epistemology. Derrida's notion that there is "nothing outside the text" means "there is no reality that is not always already interpreted through the mediating lens of language."[24] As a departure from modernity and the concept of objective knowledge, Derrida illustrates how all knowledge is interpretation, conditioned by the context and influences on the individual-in-community.[25] The context of the interpreter conditions the manner in which a phenomena will be experienced, and the very experience of any phenomenon conditions the manner in which it will be interpreted.[26] This interpretive contextualization is the impetus for the distinctively postmodern practice of deconstruction. Deconstruction has two primary purposes. First, it works to identify and bring suspicion to inherited, normative, and

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dominant interpretations of phenomena that often are portrayed as objective knowledge rather than interpreted realities.[27] Second, deconstruction works to recover "interpretations that have been marginalized and sidelined, activating voices that have been silenced."[28] This is, Smith says, the "constructive, yea prophetic, aspect of Derrida's deconstruction: a concern for justice by being concerned about dominant, status quo interpretations that silence those who see differently."[29] Thus, Smith highlights as a point of consonance between Christianity and postmodernism the potential of postmodern deconstruction to orient the community around ethics and justice. Knowledge and justice are negotiated entities through a communal project of interpretation and sharing.[30]

The community in context, then, becomes the steward of good interpretation, as Smith details:

> Given the goals and purpose of a given community, it establishes a consensus regarding the rules that will govern good interpretation . . . without the rules established by a community, there would be no criteria to govern interpretation. And Derrida is not opposed to rules as such. In fact, he speaks positively about a community having a kind of "interpretive police" to govern interpretation for that community. Thus communities fix contexts, and contexts determine meanings.[31]

Smith distinguishes, though, between "truth" and "objective knowledge."[32] It is a false assumption that an "interpretation" cannot be "true." Rather, things can be true and still be interpretations. The goal of the individual-in-community, then, is to make good or true interpretations.[33] Smith further illustrates this from a biblical perspective:

> Obviously, the Bible is subject to all kinds of interpretations. But this play of interpretations does not mean that all these interpretations are good or true. Deconstruction does not entail that one can say just anything at all about a text; it is not a celebration of sheer indeterminacy . . . Instead, Derrida emphasizes that there are important, legitimate determinations of context; in particular, the context for understanding a text, thing, or event is established by a community of interpreters who come to an agreement about what constitutes the true interpretation of a text, thing, or event.[34]

According to Smith, this fosters a healthy kind of pluralism that allows for ambiguity and interpretation to strengthen the discernment of reality.[35] Smith distinguishes, however, between a type of plurality that strengthens the exploration of various perspectives "inscribed into the very fabric of created finitude, such that we all see the same things but from different angles and locations" and a type of pluralism that presses at existential differences between peoples, such as "what it means to be authentically human and how we fit into the cosmos."[36] Smith acknowledges that even this distinction exists on a hermeneutical plane with this warning:

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> We need to consider these as deep differences in interpretation rather than glibly supposing that the Christian account is objectively true and then castigating the Buddhist account for being merely an interpretation. In fact, both are interpretations; neither is *objectively* true. And so, to a certain extent, we must also embrace this postlapsarian or directional pluralism as the given situation in which we find ourselves. To assert that our interpretation is not an interpretation but objectively true often translates into the worst kinds of imperial and colonial agendas, even without a pluralist culture.[37]

This pluralism, then, should not threaten the society's (or the Church's) understanding of reality nor its confidence in truth. Instead, it should condition the society and the Church to engage conversations about knowledge and truth from a position of humility, acknowledging various perspectives and seeing interpretation as the collective responsibility of individuals-in-community. For the Christian, Smith offers this assurance and clarification:

> If the interpretive status of the gospel rattles our confidence in its truth, this indicates that we remain haunted by the modern desire for objective certainty. But our confidence rests not on objectivity but rather on the convictional power of the Holy Spirit (which isn't exactly objective); the loss of objectivity, then, does not entail a loss of kerygmatic boldness about the truth of the gospel.[38]

The Ambiguity and Deconstruction of Metanarratives

Smith also helpfully outlines and applies Jean-François Lyotard's "incredulity towards metanarratives."[39] According to Lyotard, "metanarratives are a distinctly modern phenomenon: they are stories that not only tell a grand story (since even premodern and tribal stories do this) but also claim to be able to legitimate or prove the story's claim by an appeal to universal reason."[40] Smith's use of Lyotard is especially focused on deconstructing the metanarrative of science and reason. As products of the Enlightenment, science and reason are posited on a foundation of universal, objective fact, when in reality there is a significant narrative underlying and orienting this very foundation—"as Lyotard puts it, scientific knowledge, which considered itself to be a triumph over narrative knowledge, covertly *grounds itself in a narrative* (i.e., an originary myth)."[41] Human reason is a narrative that has become a false indicator of absolute truth. Instead, as seen in Derrida's critique in the previous section, human experience and the interplay of interpretation makes a solid reliance on human reason impossible. The notion of human reason as a transcendent and universal application of human reality that is normative in all times and places precisely fosters the hermeneutics of suspicion described by Derrida. Lyotard's skepticism towards metanarrative is an important continuation of that critique, reorienting the notion of human reason from the transcendent to a dynamic interrelational negotiation.[42] To this end, Smith clarifies the critique of postmodernism on metanarratives:

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> Metanarratives [are] universal discourses of legitimation that mask their own particularity; that is, metanarratives deny their narrative ground even as they proceed on it as a basis. In particular, we must note that the postmodern critique is not aimed at metanarratives because they are really grounded in narratives; on the contrary, the problem with metanarratives is that they do not own up to their own mythic ground. Postmodernism is not incredulity toward narrative or myth; on the contrary, it unveils that all knowledge is grounded in such.[43]

For Christianity, the potential application of Lyotard's understanding of truth and metanarrative is twofold. First, it fosters "the retrieval of a fundamentally Augustinian epistemology that is attentive to the structural necessity of faith preceding reason, believing in order to understand—trusting in order to interpret."[44] It is both an acknowledgement of the relationship between faith and knowledge as well as a hermeneutical reminder that Christianity itself is grounded on faith leading to knowledge, not vice versa. This reorientation of knowledge restores the voice of Christianity as a legitimate contributor to the negotiation of reality, where in modernity Christianity's voice had been largely silenced through the metanarrative of science and human reason.[45] Second, it helps to frame the Christian witness as narrative—the story of God's ongoing work in creating and redeeming the world. This narrative is performed liturgically as expression of Christian faith, and this liturgical expression of faith leads to knowledge and theology.[46] The caution for the Church is in how it engages that narrative as witness—whether as a story that silences other stories, or as a story that perpetuates one very good existential interpretation in dialogue with other interpretations and perspectives.

The Ambiguity and Deconstruction of Power

Along with Derrida's deconstruction and Lyotard's skepticism of metanarratives, Smith also highlights the importance of Michel Foucault's claim that "power is knowledge" as fundamental to postmodernism.[47] Foucault identifies the role of power relations within the most fundamental institutions and ideas of society. Smith lists "hospitals, schools, businesses, and . . . prisons" as institutional examples; yet institutions and ideals such as government and democracy, economics and capitalism, media, pop culture, and many other webs of relationships demonstrate the centrality of power in knowledge, message, and identity.[48] The function of these institutions and ideals is discipline and formation—the entities of power use these various institutions as a means to disciple and form society according to the predetermined ideals of those in power.[49] In conjunction with Derrida and Lyotard, Foucault's postmodern critique centers around identifying and deconstructing these normative expressions of power and privilege.[50] However, Smith nuances Foucault's suspicion of power from a Christian perspective:

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> The critical point is that Foucault is absolutely right in his analysis of the way in which mechanisms of discipline serve to form individuals, but he is wrong to cast all such discipline and formation in a negative light. In other words, Christians should understand discipline positively, precisely because Christians should not be liberals in the classical sense . . . Christians should eschew the very notion of an autonomous agent who resists any form of control. By rejecting Foucault's liberal Enlightenment commitments, but appropriating his analyses of the role of discipline in formation, we can almost turn Foucault's project on its head.[51]

Smith's point is that Christianity is a normative exercise of power and authority, and the very notion of Christian discipleship involves a submission to the authoritative nature of Christianity.[52]

The fulcrum of Smith's perspective negotiates a balance between two extremes. On one side is the inappropriately authoritarian institutionalization of the Church and the society that continues to foster oppression and abuse—here, the message of the Gospel brings life and freedom.[53] On the other side is what Smith describes as an overly liberal, autonomous, and anti-institutional church that does not realize the extent of the consequences of such a stance.[54] Christianity involves power relations and disciplinary techniques that disciple people against the broken and sinful practices of the world.[55] Too often, however, "by appropriating the liberal Enlightenment notion of negative freedom and participating in its nonconformist resistance to discipline (and hence a resistance to the classical spiritual disciplines), Christians are in fact being conformed to the patterns of this world."[56] Smith insists, therefore, that there is a crucial link between power and *telos*:

> We can distinguish good discipline from bad discipline by its *telos* . . . A disciplinary form is proper when it corresponds with the proper end of humanity, which is to be (renewed) image bearers of God. So other forms of disciplinary formation are bad and wrong insofar as they try to mold human beings into something other than what they are called to be.[57]

For Smith, this means that there is an inherent relationship between power relation, *telos*, and disciplinary form, which conditions the manner in which cultural disciplines and practices might be critically and uncritically engaged. Smith illustrates this with some examples from U.S. popular culture:

> So also with the church: because the disciplinary mechanisms of Disney, MTV, and the Gap are so insidious and covert, we don't recognize the way in which their message—and their vision of the human telos—is shaping our own identity. Christians need first to recognize that disciplinary formation takes place in culture, then second, to recognize the antithesis between the dominant culture's understanding of the human calling and the biblical understanding of our ultimate vocation. But the church must also do a third thing: enact countermeasures, counterdisciplines that will form us into the kinds of people that God calls us to be. Too often we imagine that the goal of

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> Christian discipleship is to train us to think the right way, to believe the right things. But the ultimate goal of sanctification and discipleship is to shape us into a certain kind of person . . . [58]

Thus, postmodernism is predicated on a project of deconstruction and a hermeneutic of suspicion that are manifest in Derrida as well as in Lyotard's skepticism of metanarrative and Foucault's suspicion of power relations. Smith notes the variant positions of the Church towards postmodernism, where some see it as a "new enemy taking over the role of secular humanism," while others see it as "fresh wind of the Spirit sent to revitalize the dry bones of the church."[59] Smith suggests that in either case "postmodernism tends to be a chameleon taking on whatever characteristics we want it to: if it is seen as enemy, postmodernism will be defined as monstrous; if it is seen as savior, postmodernism will be defined as redemptive."[60]

Liturgical Inculturation

In my particular academic field, liturgical inculturation provides one methodology for navigating postmodernism in the Church. This methodology has been employed especially on "the mission field," though increasingly the principles of this methodology are seen to govern almost all liturgical theology and practice. Liturgical theologians rely on inculturation for two primary purposes. First, inculturation works to identify that which is the core of Christianity, both in abstract concepts and in concrete practices, even while recognizing the contextuality of these core concepts and practices. Second, inculturation fosters the interaction of this Christian core with various cultural contexts, a process which inevitably changes *both* the culture and the newly inculturated essence.[61] These purposes are illustrated in a sort of equation offered by Peter Phan for the purpose of comprehending the process of inculturation: A+B=C.[62] In this equation, the "A" represents the "Christian core," again recognizing that "A" itself is some complex balance of unchanging essence and cultural/hermeneutical conditioning. The "B" is culture, which contributes philosophy, ritual behavior, language, art, architecture, and other cultural agents towards the unique engagement of "A." The complex nature of culture ("B") in a postmodern U.S. context makes the process of inculturation both intriguing and complicated. The "+" of the equation is the hermeneutical catalyst between the "A" and the "B". The very nature of addition is to enhance or increase, yet in some cases subtraction and refinement are needed in order to facilitate the interaction.[63] "C," then, is the new, inculturated, and local expression of Christianity—unified by the essential proclamation of and faith in the Christian witness, yet diverse in its cultural and contextual form. The cyclical nature of this process in every time and place ensures that the new "C" invokes change in both the "B" and the "A," giving the equation a kind of reciprocal momentum that propels its repetition.

In this way, the lens of inculturation helps to enhance the Church's understanding of its own liturgical practices, both in their immediate cultural contexts and in the way certain practices become "transcultural."[64] Inculturation also helps to frame and navigate these issues of ambiguity, deconstruction, and hermeneutics for the Church

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in its engagement of culture. Inculturation, in postmodern terms, "is not an 'incarnation' of a timeless, unchanging and acultural reality (such as the eternal Logos) into a particular culture, but an *intercultural* encounter or dialogue between at least two cultures."[65] For Phan, issues of power are negotiated along the boundaries of inculturation, especially in the relationship between "Roman authorities and local churches."[66] This is particularly evident in his critique of various Catholic interpretations of inculturation in the twentieth century, specifically his argument that the Roman rite itself is a cultural form and not a transcultural essence.[67] From Phan's perspective, the Church fails in its engagement of cultural difference, noting that

> its approach to inculturation lies somewhere between assimilation and hegemonic control. The assimilationist strategy proposes an eventual eradication of cultural differences . . . immigrants are expected to 'become like one of us.' Hegemonic control honours cultural differences, but insists on some common culture among different ethnic groups, and the culture of the dominant or hegemonic group is imposed on all as such common culture, no matter what lip service is given to the rhetoric of equality and about the right of a people to its own culture and language.[68]

He notes that this "monocultural" orientation is the trend of multicultural societies including the United States, making it "all the more incumbent upon the Church, given its catholicity, to be more committed to genuinely equal partnership in inculturation."[69]

Conclusion

Thus, our Lutheran engagement of liturgical praxis—delivering the promises of God in Christ and receiving them in faith—necessarily involves a communal engagement with inculturation. The "A" of Gospel promise is delivered to the "B" of cultural context by means of various cultural forms, including language, ritual, music, art, architecture, aesthetics, and the like. These cultural forms are not value-neutral, but have associations and deep structures of various implications. I often impress upon my students that culture is not neutral, but all culture is redeemable. In this, ambiguity is acknowledged, deconstruction appropriately applied, and hermeneutics appropriately engaged to nuance the engagement of Gospel and culture that we know as church. This is the beauty of A+B=C. Inculturation is, as I describe it often to my students, an unavoidable, beautiful mess. Postmodernity, especially the engagement of ambiguity, deconstruction, and meaning making, offers helpful frameworks for the engagement of the inculturation task.

Liturgical inculturation is just one example of how postmodern principles inform our lives as Christians in this world. We would do well to reckon with these principles, with their strengths and weaknesses, as we carry out our callings to proclaim the Gospel at all times and in all places.

Endnotes

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[1]A small handful of students have made the argument that we are "beyond postmodernism," and that is an intriguing question for another article. For now, I maintain that postmodernism still highly influences church and society, especially in the United States.
[2]Gerald Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians: A Postmodern Critique* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), 2.
[3]Arbuckle, 2. Arbuckle notes that this view is still widely held by what he calls "nonspecialists."
[4]Arbuckle, 10.
[5]Arbuckle, 7.
[6]Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 65.
[7]James Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in the Age of Normal Nihilism* (Penn State University Press, 1997), 46.
[8]Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 65.
[9]James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 26. Smith articulates this ambiguity as a type of continuity with modernity, further critiquing both from a Christian perspective:

> Postmodernism is an admittedly pluriform and variegated phenomenon. And postmodernism does not make a clean break from modernism. There are both continuities and discontinuities between modernity and postmodernity. The most significant continuity is that both deny grace; in other words, both modernity and postmodernity are characterized by an idolatrous notion of self-sufficiency and a deep naturalism. Noting this theological continuity, one also recognizes philosophical and cultural continuities, such that postmodernity is often an intensification of modernity, particularly with respect to notions of freedom, the use of technology, and so on.

[10]Ross, *Extravagant Affections,* 66, emphasis in original.
[11]M. C. Luchetti-Bingemer, "Postmodernity and Sacramentality," in *Sacramental Presence in Postmodern Context*, ed. L. Boeve and L. Leijssen (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 69.
[12]See also J. Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987) for a concise and accessible introduction to this.
[13]Peter Phan, "Liturgical Inculturation: Unity in Diversity in the Postmodern Age," in *Liturgy in a Postmodern World*, ed. Keith Pecklers (New York: Continuum, 2003), 56.
[14]Phan, 56.
[15]Phan, 56, 57.
[16]Phan, 58.
[17]Phan, 58.
[18]Phan, 58.
[19]Phan, 59, referencing Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).
[20]Phan, 59.
[21]Phan, 63.
[22]David Stewart, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Journal of Literature & Theology* 3, no. 3 (November 1989): 296–307.
[23]Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism,* 1.
[24]Smith, 39.
[25]Smith, 52.
[26]Smith, 49.
[27]Smith, 51.

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[28]Smith, 51.
[29]Smith, 51.
[30]Smith, 52.
[31]Smith, 53.
[32]Smith, 43.
[33]Smith, 43.
[34]Smith, 53.
[35]Smith, 50.
[36]Smith, 50.
[37]Smith, 50, 51.
[38]Smith, 51.
[39]Smith, 62.
[40]Smith, 65.
[41]Smith, 67.
[42]Smith, 67.
[43]Smith, 69.
[44]Smith, 72.
[45]Smith, 73, 74.
[46]Smith, 76.
[47]Smith, 23.
[48]Smith, 85.
[49]Smith, 85ff.
[50]Smith, 98.
[51]Smith, 99.
[52]Smith, 100.
[53]Smith, 100.
[54]Smith, 99.
[55]Smith, 105, 106.
[56]Smith, 101.
[57]Smith, 102.
[58]Smith, 106.
[59]Smith, 18.
[60]Smith, 18, 19.
[61]Phan, "Liturgical Inculturation," 55.
[62]Phan, 76.
[63]Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 39–43. Schreiter's work informs my understanding and application of the "+" in Phan's equation.
[64]For one such framework of "transcultural" elements, see the "Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture Full Text," Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, posted June 16, 2014, https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/nairobi-statement-on-worship-and-culture-full-text/.
[65]Phan, "Liturgical Inculturation," 64.
[66]Phan, 65.
[67]Phan, 70. Here and in the next few references Phan is especially critiquing the 1994 document *Varietates Legitimae*, which works to set boundaries on the scope and process of inculturation in the Roman rite. For a full text of *Varietates Legitimae*, see "*Varietates Legitimae*: Inculturation and the Roman Liturgy," Adoremus, accessed February 28, 2017, https://adoremus.org/1994/03/instruction-inculturation-and-the-roman-liturgy/.
[68]Phan, "Liturgical Inculturation," 70, 71.
[69]Phan, 71.

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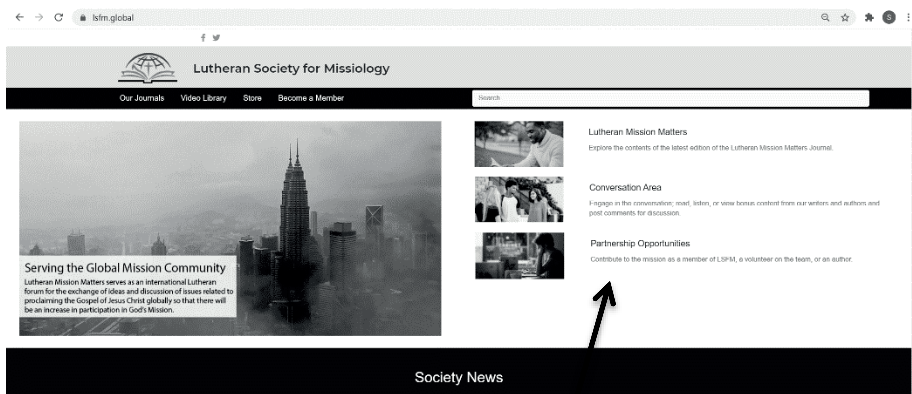

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Anthropological Considerations of Acts 17

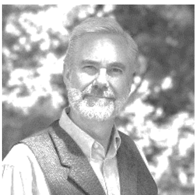
Jack M. Schultz

"From one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his children.' Therefore since we are God's children, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:26–30, NIV).

Introduction

The following is an explication of the significance of a portion of Acts 17 *qua* a Lutheran Christian informed by my vocation of anthropologist. This investigation considers the implications of the easily overlooked assertion that St. Paul makes to the people of Athens: God determines the times and places for people to live.

A bit of my personal background: I am a lifelong LCMS member. I am rostered as a Director of Christian Education in our synod. I am also a practicing anthropologist. I am in my twenty-sixth year as Professor of Anthropology at Concordia, Irvine. I have been involved in training our full-time and volunteer missionaries on and off since 1997. I have taught courses on the intersection of missions, ministry, and culture at both of our seminaries. As such, I am deeply committed to Christ's mission and the mission efforts of our church. As an anthropologist, my vocation is to investigate the human, social, and material forces which organize our experiences. As a Christian who is training missionaries, I attempt to apply those anthropological insights into our mission strategies. It is that intersection of Biblical truth and anthropological insight which gives rise to this article. My goal is to provide additional factors for those in



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mission to consider as they develop strategies to proclaim the Gospel of Christ throughout the whole world.

Anthropologists explore human cultures. We go off to exotic locations and spend time in communities making observations and developing theories. We look at the presence and absence of local resources, and then conclude how those resources affect the lifeway of the group. We describe how the environmental, material, and social resources constrain the group and shape their basic subsistence, settlement patterns, kinship organizations, political organizations, and how the absence of resources forces interactions with their neighbors through trading or raiding, and so on. These material constraints are viewed as critical for understanding the culture being observed. When explaining how and where various ethnic peoples live, anthropologists recount a variety of environmental, historical, and social factors that result in the placement of people around the globe.

The Acts 17 text above provides an intriguing additional factor. It states that God himself determined or appointed the times and exact places for the "ethnics" (ἑθνοσ, *ethnos;* peoples, nations, races) to live. Therefore, the situation of human beings in specific times and places is not simply the result of ordered socio-cultural processes, nor the result of random accidents; rather, it is the determination of God. As an anthropologist I am particularly sensitive to the implications of that assertion in a way that non-specialists are not. The text[1] expresses quite clearly that the ethnics (*ethnos*) were appointed by God to their place and time (God "*determined* the times set for them and the *exact* places where they should live"). God places people within a context. As an anthropologist, I recognize that "time and place," a context, necessarily involves *culture*. The sense of this text should be understood as "God places people in their respective cultures."

What is even more remarkable about this text is the stated *purpose* for which God so determined the placement of the ethnics—that they should "seek God and perhaps reach out and find him."[2] The text might then be glossed as "God places people in their respective cultures so that by way of them they should seek God."

Consider the consequences to such an understanding: God determined the cultural milieus for all the ethnics, whether they are in communist China, Aztec Mesoamerica, Buddhist Japan, Muslim Iran, or Lakota, Pawnee, Seminole and Inuit native America, or Lutheran America, to "search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us." God has made us, *all of us*, to seek Him—it is our very nature. It seems then, that through, by way of, our placement in time and space (our unique cultural context), determined by God, that we should seek Him.

Paul Addresses the Areopagus

In chapter 17 of Acts we read that Paul had just left Berea for Athens, and while he was waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive "his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). He responded by "reasoning" with the Jews and devout persons in the synagogue and those who happened to be in the

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marketplace. As a result of his preaching, he was invited to Areopagus to present his "new teaching" to the Athenians and foreigners. He begins his address with this observation: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious": an observation that affirmed their orientation. But then he immediately asserts a correction—what you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. Paul posits this unknown god as θέος (*theos*; a god, God, the Creator), not made or served by human hands, but instead the One who gives to mankind "life and breath and everything." It is then that the remarkable passage occurs: "he . . . determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling places" of "every nation of mankind" (Acts 17:26). This phrase, allotted periods and boundaries, compels me as an anthropologist because time and place indicates culture.

The Role of Culture

Even an elementary understanding of anthropology reveals that time and place heavily influence the life of groups and individuals within those groups. Time and place are not neutral. They are not blank canvases that freely acting individuals can write their lives upon. Social and cultural forces allow and constrain, even when we are unaware of those forces. God "determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us."

Each of us, as socialized members of a culture and society, were participants in that culture and society long before we were aware of it. As we acquired language, food preferences, manners, and a sense of humor, we also acquired a religious orientation—in other words, we acquired a *how* to seek God.[3] Our cultural context provides practices, rituals, morals, and sentiments by which we "seek God and perhaps find him." We use the channels established by our cultural context. By the time we became aware of the channels, we were already firmly held in their grasp. These are forces that are implicit in a "time and place." We had learned *how* to seek God long before we even knew we were seeking God.

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None of us is exempted from these forces of culture—they are impossible to escape. We cannot have thoughts without language (and a particular language at that), we cannot live without food; we cannot interact without some rules of governance. Indeed, human beings require culture. We are not born with instincts which order our interactions with the environment; we need to be taught how to interact with each other and our surroundings simply to stay alive. Our identities, values, ideals, aesthetics, tastes are all contingent upon our cultural context. We may not care for our culture; we can attempt to reject it, and we can try to shape and change it, but we will simply end up with another, equally constraining culture. We cannot be "cultureless" and, as asserted in Acts 17:26, God placed us within *specific cultures* that we should seek Him.

Our identities, values, ideals, aesthetics, tastes are all contingent upon our cultural context. We may not care for our culture; we can attempt to reject it, and we can try to shape and change it, but we will simply end up with another, equally constraining culture.

As a Christian, understanding this text is truth, and as an anthropologist, sensitive to the importance of context, it seems clear to me that through, or by way of, our culture (i.e., our time and place) that God has determined we should seek Him. I'm not certain that we Christians have appreciated the importance of that assertion; for if we did, we would necessarily approach religious diversity differently.

Human Efforts to Find God are Inadequate but Valuable

Now with all this background in place, allow me to state the thesis as plainly as I can: *God places people within a cultural context which includes a religious tradition, whether it be Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Catholicism, or Lutheranism, so that they might seek Him.* It is not an accident of birth that we are born into a cultural-religious context. It is God's doing, so that we might seek Him.[4] Apparently this "ethnically relative religious seeking" is important to God despite the fact that it is clearly incomplete. As fallen creatures, we are prone to idolatry. Our religious tendencies are often misled and corrupted. We are self-serving and are reluctant to recognize our creature-to-Creator relationship. Yet, we long to be Home, "to seek God," to return to the One who created us.

It is necessary to understand that this determination of "the times" and "exact places" does not mean God caused some to be Muslim, or Buddhist, or Catholic, Traditional Native, or Lutheran; rather, God places us in contexts in which we are to seek Him. Indeed, I would maintain that the categories of religion we are comfortable with (Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, etc.) are not meaningful categories to God. God sees individuals, unique and distinctive, and desires a unique and distinctive relationship

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with each. God creates individuals with a longing to return to Him, but now with a fallen nature that hinders, obfuscates, and misleads. Such is the human condition.

"God did this *so that men would* seek him." *They* seek God—that means that this is a human endeavor—man seeking God. So as they seek (ψηλαφάω, reach out for, grope for, to be grasped after) they may perhaps "snatch handfuls" of God—partial, incomplete, inaccurate, to be sure—yet this groping is apparently valuable to God—*that* is why He determined their times and places. They were to "seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him"—until that time when God would reveal His fullness to each person through the cross and resurrection of the God-man Jesus Christ. It is as if we are to learn a way to seek God—a set of laws, or ceremony, or ritual—only to find it deficient. I am reminded of what Paul wrote about the Israelites, which might be said of any who participate in their cultural ways of "seeking God:"

> For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. (Romans 10:2–4)

To the Christians in Rome Paul wrote, "for what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made" (Rom 1:19–20); and in our text, "being then God's offspring" (Acts 17:29), it should not be surprising that people would respond to this manifestation of God through a religious response. And immediately Paul recognizes the limitations of that response. He continues to the Romans, "for although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things" (Rom 1:21–23). We have a divinely assigned longing for God, but our quests to know Him are inadequate until He reveals Himself in Christ Jesus.

God Reveals Himself in Christ Jesus

Our text goes on: "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30, NIV). Within the context of the Acts narrative of Athens reviewed earlier, the ignorance referred to is idolatry: religiousness misdirected toward an unknown god. The directive to repentance in this text does not likely mean a tear-filled confession of regrettable acts; rather, the more literal understanding of the Greek word μετανοιειν, connoting a necessary "change of mind or attitude," is more appropriate here. In this context then, the repentance required may be viewed as the individual's recognition of her or his condition—that there is something more to this "groping after God." That which their efforts to find God held in promise, gives way to the realization that God in Christ is seeking them!

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As one theologian observed, repentance is "pressing on to lay hold upon that for which Christ laid hold upon you."[5] It is not the search that needs to be repented of, but the ignorance—remember that God *placed* them in their positions that they might seek Him—they were acting in their ignorance in their blind groping after God, but now He has revealed himself to them in the cross of Christ. In the person of Christ, we recognize that our search is over and that what we searched for has found us. Our lives are now changed. We go forward "speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph 4:15), learning our place in His work and will.

Why? "Because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed" (Acts 17:31). All will be discerned, properly divided—"this, not this"—in and by Christ.

It is not inaccurate to describe that the difference between the ethnic groper and the follower of Jesus is the nature of our relationship to God—the former seeks, the latter is sought. This is fundamentally the message of the Gospel, and this is what we are commanded to proclaim. We proclaim the way, Christ. We know the way because God has revealed Himself to us in Christ. What we through our "seeking" could only occasionally touch, He has revealed fully. God desires relationship with us, and the only way of meaningful relationship with Him is the way that He has ordained—through His Christ. In the person of Christ, we recognize that our search is over because God has found us. That which was longed for has been revealed to us in the good news that God reclaims and redeems us in Christ.

The culturally determined religion (the context in which one is found) proves itself inadequate and must lead us to Christ, the Truth, the One by, through, and for which all things are made. These religious sentiments are to awaken in us that which is deepest, most foundational to our being: that we are created to be in relationship with the Creator and that He created us to know and follow Him. These religious *gropings* remind us that we are not what we should be; that we cannot with even our purest, most earnest efforts be that which we were created to be and do that which we were created to perform. It is appropriate to understand these religious directives just as Lutherans have understood the first two functions of the Law: as a curb to keep order, as a mirror to show us our sin and to demonstrate that we cannot fulfill its requirements. But now, "a righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law . . . the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (Rom 3:21–22).

Implications of Paul's Assertion

My goal has been to apply anthropological insight to our understanding of the text to provide a fuller appreciation of the significance and implications of Paul's assertion that God Himself determined or appointed the times and exact places for the peoples to live. As an anthropologist, I recognize that "time and place" necessarily indicates *culture*. The sense of this text should be understood, therefore, as "God places people

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in their respective cultures so that by way of them they should seek God." This seems an indisputable assertion.

On this base I am going to build. While not explicitly found in the text, I will draw implications and state directives which flow out of the text and my own experiences and ruminations regarding cross-cultural/cross-religious encounters. These observations, to me, flow inevitably from Paul's statement. I understand that the reader might not agree, and that would be the locus of continued dialogue. At this time in the life of American Christianity where our relevance is continuously being challenged, such dialogue is imperative. If I have successfully established the force of time and place in shaping a person's "seeking for God," then several significant implications follow:

We need to acknowledge, not denigrate, religious diversity as determined by God.

Rather than viewing cultural diversity as merely a consequence of sin or the fall,[6] it appears to be a means that God has prepared for us to "seek Him." And rather than denigrating non-Christian religions simply as false we should rather view them as incomplete—that is, these cultural expressions were appointed for a season—and *that* season passes when the fullness of God in Christ is revealed to individuals.[7] The revealed Word transcends the directives of culture. Then the ethnic's pursuit of God gives way to God's pursuit of them in Christ. Perhaps we should view their "groping after God" as a tutoring,[8] a necessary step which God himself determined. Therefore, we must not simply dismiss these humanly constructed religions as false. Of course, humanly constructed religions are limited, misleading, inadequate, and if left to themselves ultimately idolatrous; however, it seems this *seeking* of God is what God wills.

We also are cultured and we need to repent our ignorance.

"The nations" includes all people, even us. We are also ethnics: Lutheran; American. God has determined the time and place set for us. We have been living under the rule of our own culture—blind to its machinations and idiosyncrasies. We too, like people everywhere, have been taught to believe that our way is universal, honorable, and just "regular," not cultural. We often confuse culture for reality, the particular for a universal, a temporal for an eternal. "All people everywhere" are commanded to repent of ignorance. That includes us who were placed in a nominally "Christian" culture. For we also are guilty of failing to "clearly perceive" God in the "things that have been made," and although we know God, we do not honor Him as God. Consider that many of the Israelites, to whom "the oracles of God" were entrusted, failed to recognize the Christ when He stood before them. As Paul continued to the Romans,

> Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you

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> who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Romans 2:1–4)

Perhaps we might admit that religious knowledge, like all other knowledge, may develop through time and that even religious knowledge builds upon knowledge. Did the infinite God reveal different aspects of the truth to different peoples? Have others, placed within their cultures by God that they might seek Him, anything to teach us about the truth of the infinite God? Is *Sehnsucht* felt only by Westerners? Do only Lutherans feel the hammer of the law and a longing for grace? What might a Chinese philosopher contribute to an understanding of righteousness, or a Navajo shaman to an understanding of grace? Do we know all that can be known about the infinite God already? "He did this [placed people in specific religious traditions] so that men might seek him, though he is not far from any of us."

Even those of us who are known by the living Christ, who seek faithfully to live out a relationship with the living God do not have a "once-and-for-all" understanding of the Creator's infinitude. We who have been found are not at the end but the beginning of our journey with our Lord. To admit that our knowledge is partial, incomplete, contextual, does not follow that it is in error. Are we not allowed to build upon the truth we inherited? Have we concluded that "all people everywhere" does not include us, that we have no ignorance to repent of? I am mindful here of Luther's Thesis 1 of 95: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

> To admit that our knowledge is partial, incomplete, contextual, does not follow that it is in error. Are we not allowed to build upon the truth we inherited?

Might we be guilty of having fossilized a partial understanding of God and fighting valiantly to preserve (protect) it. God is an infinite, living being, a person, interested and active. It is not doctrines that we are to know, it is not a holy book that we are to love, it is not a franchise that we are to patronize—rather, we are to know a living person, Christ Jesus, who promises His continued presence. He is not an elaborate scheme of interrelated propositions and if/then statements. He is not a system of carefully parsed and placed words to be recited and embraced, but a person, Christ, to be known and followed.

What has happened to our prophetic imagination? The Word of God is a person, alive and active—a vital force who reveals himself ever-anew. The Reformation did not get it right once for all. We must again be open to the urgings of the Spirit to expose and purify the Church's sins and ignorance. We have reached the point in our nation when we are no longer defaulted to nominally Christian explanations and assumptions. We are beginning to feel the antagonisms (well-earned in many cases) of people who

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are dissatisfied with narrow partisans speaking for God and tired accounts of "what the Bible says."

Perhaps our seminaries might be thought of more like laboratories that discover rather than museums that preserve. I realize I am causing a rising discomfort, as even the suggestion of critical inquiry which might result in new insight has been chained to the specters of faithlessness, heterodoxy, and heresy. We have bound any change of understanding to the slippery slope of apostasy. Fossilization is understood as faithfulness.[9] But certainly we, direct heirs of the Reformation, must recognize that human institutions are prone to corruption and must be ongoingly subjected to the judgment of God.

People will respond to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as cultured persons.

Just as culture is critical in the formation of the non-Christian religious seeking, it is equally critical in the formation of an authentic response of faith. We who have been called to faith respond in worship, devotion, service, and righteous living. Each of these areas is lived out in a context of culture and that culture influences their expression.[10]

Christians' communications with the nations must use the ethnic n's "seeking of God" as the starting place from which to communicate the fullness of God. One can see in this text how Paul did that very thing. Notice that Paul's approach described in the text does not begin with a condemnation of their efforts nor a denigration of their "seeking" as simply false. Rather, he frames it as incomplete: "Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23, NIV). Paul begins with statements with which his hearers will agree: "As some of your own poets have said . . ." (Acts 17:28–29, NIV). They have already been engaged in a search for truth, and that search needs to be directed. Paul goes about providing that direction here.[11]

What is the religious understanding with which the convert begins? This needs to be built upon, not denied and abolished. What, for example, is the good news for a Muslim? What is the good news for a Navajo who is much more sensitive to feelings of shame than guilt? How does a former Muslim live out righteousness? What are the sins that vex her? How is the neighbor loved? What does the joyful noise sound like? What is modest attire and non-coarse speech for the Indonesian young adult? What does "worshipping in spirit and truth" look like for a community with no tradition of corporate worship? And who should answer these questions? Certainly not the cultural outsider who has parochial ideas as to what the Christian must look like.

Perhaps the Arab convert will still wear a hijab, kneel toward the "holy city," but pray five times a day to Jesus. Or, perhaps the Native American convert will still greet the four directions each morning with a sacred pipe filled with tobacco offering the "visible breath" of a smoke-infused (incensed) prayer to the "one who holds all things together." Might not a sweat lodge ritual be a "daily reminder of our baptism," or a smudging of white sage accompany a confession of sins?

When a person "comes to the knowledge of the truth," she or he will do it in a cultured way. We don't utterly cease being who we are after conversion; we become more, we become our true being. Our Lord encounters us as cultured people, within a

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cultural context. It would be heavy-handed to require the new Christian to abandon their culture. We shouldn't expect her to abandon her language, her dress, food preferences, and celebrations. We should expect that she understand these differently, just as Western Christians have made use of non-Christian-but-not-anti-Christian practices such as Christmas trees and Yule logs in the homes and sanctuaries, egg and rabbit symbolism at Easter (and even this common name for the celebration of the resurrection!), albs, voter's meetings and Robert's Rules of Order, pews, pulpits, church shopping, and marketing strategies.

We should not be surprised that Christian churches take on local color, for Christians respond to the universal Gospel in culturally meaningful ways.[12] Perhaps the converts won't join our churches and sing our songs. Perhaps they'll start their own seminaries and publish their own materials. We must trust that same Spirit who guides us will guide them in the truth. They might not "look Christian" or "act Christian," but might that be because we have in mind a very narrow, culturally specific image of what being Christian must be? Recognizing the inseparability of doctrine and praxis, of culture and faith, we must reject the assumption that they must look, sound, and act like us.

Converts should not be expected to change their language, dress, food preferences, that is, those *adiaphoric* features of culture. Historically, Christian converts were required to abandon all the markings of their pagan past, many of which might be best understood as their cultural accouterments, and to take up Christian markers, many of which might be best understood as the missionaries' cultural accouterments. Historical examples include hair braids, dancing, prayers accompanied with the incense of burning tobacco, polygamy, surf boarding, exposed female breasts, low-stakes gambling, peyote, uncooked meat, native languages, praying prostrate, stickball, and fermented beverages. And even if any of these things might be demonstrated as exclusively "religious" it does not follow that they could not be "converted" to Christian meanings in the same way that trees, eggs, organs, albs, democratic principles, and capitalism have been reinterpreted for Christian use.

I fear this all might be misunderstood as Universalism. It is not. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and no one comes to the Father but by Him. He and the Father are one. Rather than judging that "gropers" are lost, we should be declaring that they "who were once far off'[13] have almost arrived, and the Master of the House is on His way to welcome. Rather than us believing that *we* are Home already, perhaps these others might have something to offer us along the way.

We need to reframe the missionary encounter.

Our God-given seeking after God is incomplete. God must reveal Himself to us if we are to know Him as He is. "All people everywhere need to repent," that includes us. We too are cultured and parochial, bound by our cultures; we too lack a full understanding of the infinite God. When we knowingly settle for less than the true object of our groping, we are committing idolatry. It is not an exaggeration to state that the seekers do indeed commit idolatry when the *search* for *God* ends and a

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caricature of God is codified, institutionalized, and venerated—that is, when it becomes merely a *religion*. Here, even followers of Jesus must face a judgment of God: Have we settled for a description of God rather than a bond with the living God? Are we so naïve to believe that we have a complete, perfect understanding of God? We are at risk of settling for a depiction of God rather than being known by God.[14] We would also do well to consider that perhaps the ethnics may have clarity in some areas that we may see only dimly, just as we may have some clarity in areas where they see dimly. We proclaim Christ, the son of God, crucified, died and resurrected. That is always what we bring to the conversation. He is the "exact imprint of [God's] nature" (Heb 1:3). He is the One whom they have unknowingly sought all their lives.

We must admit that our churches aren't only about Him. They are also human institutions fraught with human limitations and agendas. We can enter a missionary encounter knowing that we have ignorance to be repented of, and the judgment of God to be endured even while we boldly proclaim Christ crucified as the only way to the Father.

Perhaps evangelism must be reframed as a dialogue in which both parties have something to contribute. What do you know, for example, about Islam that isn't through a Western-Christian lens? Have you actually developed a relationship with a Muslim who earnestly seeks the will of God, to learn his deeply held, honestly sought and acquired convictions? We are by default obtuse to those views differ from our own. While we could seek to understand others, which is the only way we could hope to be understood in return, we are satisfied with presenting our own representations of truth. But without having a basic ground of respect and value, our representations inevitably appear to them as provincial.

Perhaps we may have to learn to be uncomfortable with the difficult questions and allow them to show our "ignorance" and remind us that we need to repent. The missionary's task is to be a witness, not a converter. We speak of what we know; we proclaim what we have experienced: Christ, God's anointed, crucified, risen, and eternally present. That is our calling. It is the Spirit's task to bring faith, repentance, and sanctification.

Conclusions

This investigation of Acts 17 is informed by my vocation as an anthropologist. For the anthropologist, the impact of culture is difficult to overestimate. It shapes, directs, hides, limits, enables, and completes. Throughout this exploration, I have taken the phrase "God determined the times . . . and exact places . . . so that men would seek him" to mean that God values cultural, and therefore religious, diversity. As an anthropologist, I am focused on the often-hidden power of culture. My primary task is to make explicit these usually tacit forces. It has been my goal is this paper to remind readers of the importance of these cultural factors in shaping our response to the Gospel of Christ. Theology without acknowledging culture's role in shaping understanding, even understanding the Word of God, becomes parochial and ethnocentric. An emphasis on cultural relativities, without the grounding in the Word of God, becomes a subjective wasteland where any claim to truth is as valid as another.

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I have to speak from my position. I proclaim out of my vocation. I am not a theologian. And no doubt, error might be argued with my specific implications, but Paul's main assertion cannot be dismissed: "God determined the times . . . and exact places," and with that the stated purpose that "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him" (Acts 17:26, 27, NIV). What else are we to make of it but that cultural context and therefore religious diversity is valuable to God? Although this diversity is an essential starting point, it must give way to the fulness of God revealed in Christ.

When the Word is proclaimed, the Spirit is active. The same Spirit which lovingly brought us to faith is also at work in the lives of the ethnics. In the same way that the others have been bound by cultural limitations regarding the infinite God, we too have ignorance that we must repent of. The Spirit of God revealed Himself to us with cultural contexts, in a language we understand, using metaphors, images, and concepts that we embrace (all of which are products of culture). We "see in a mirror dimly . . . I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:13), but that is not yet. Certainly we must recognize that God's Spirit is active among us still, that we need to "grow up into to salvation" (1 Pet 2:2), that our human institutions need correcting. That revelation creates repentance, an errant heart in need of return to its maker to become all that it was created to be. That revelation is of the person Jesus Christ, not a humanly generated religious understanding. We must proceed with humility, trusting that God has been at work among these others. We must proceed with a desire to understand these others in a spirit of cooperation rather than contention, and above all, continue with a clear proclamation of the Good News of Christ Jesus in a way that the other can comprehend.

Endnotes

[1] See also Deut 32:8a (NIV): "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples." Interestingly, and more in support of my thesis, the earliest Hebrew text of this verse reads, "When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the people according to the number of the gods." Quoted in Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 527.

[2] Others have commented on this text: F.F. Bruce asks, "What was God's purpose in thus arranging time and place so providentially for men and women's well-being? 'It was', Paul says, 'in order that they might seek God and find him.'" *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 338. Ben Witherington concludes that "Humankind was not created to inhabit various places and so to seek God since they were scattered across the face of the earth, as if looking for some sort of divine unifying factor. To the contrary, by nature, not by locale or placement, human beings were made to be in fellowship with God from the beginning of creation." *The Acts of the Apostles*, 528.

[3] Or gods, or spirits, or ancestors, or undefined forces which are believed to affect human beings as the particular cultural context dictates.

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[4] The text asserts an astonishing proposition—God determining times and exact locations—which raises significant and vexing questions: Is it referring to the specific location of all people, in all times, as being determined by God (and does that include, for example, one's move to another state or another nation as part of this determination? Are *re*locations included? What about forced relocations or migrations)? And what does "exact places" mean? Is it to be understood at the level of continents, nations, towns, or houses? How does "God determined" align with free will? Or might this divine placement refer to some more general categories such as race or ethnicity? That is, perhaps these people groups were at some time in the past placed, a God-given start, but that later by way of a variety of social and historical (not to mention psychological) factors their descendants, acting on their own free will, freely moved about. But even this is problematic. "Groups" are not static. Members of groups die, children are born, and new members marry in. Indeed, the concept of "race" masks the fluid nature of groups and implies for many a kind of "natural" division and classification that has only recently become mixed. But social history and genetic analysis convincingly demonstrates that groups are continually fissioning and fusioning. There is not nor has there ever been "pure races." Certainly there were not five sets of Adam and Eve, each with a different "pure race." All of the human diversity over-generalized and codified into five races comes out of only two people. It must be stressed that "God's determination" here does not mean that He machinates all human movement (i.e., determined by God's direct action and intervention). For that would be exceedingly problematic when one considers the vast forced and voluntary displacement of people groups and even our current (but constantly changing) cultural/political boundaries, but it certainly must mean that cultural diversity is not simply a result of sin or the fall.

[5] George MacDonald, *George MacDonald in the Pulpit: A Compilation of Spoken Sermons from 1871–1901*, comp. David Edwards and J. Joseph Flynn (Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen Printing and Publishing, 1996), 309.

[6] I often hear it argued that cultural diversity is a result of the dispersion of peoples as their "language was confused" at the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9) and therefore an aspect of the fallen world. It might well be argued that the "confusion of tongues" was as much about forcing people "to fill the whole earth" as it was about punishing for pride.

[7] This "season" can be viewed in universal terms—"But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son" (Gal 4:4a, NIV), inaugurating the Christian era—but may also be viewed as a season in the life of an individual—that time before a person comes to faith. In other words, "in the past" may be referring not just to the period before Christ incarnate, but to a specific individual's past; that time before "Christ for me."

[8] The ethnics also have a tutor in a way analogous to the pre-Christian Jews and the Law. "But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor" (Gal 3:23–25, NASB). It may be fruitful to note that the Greek word translated here as "law" is νομοσ, or nomos. This word "nomos" is also used by social scientists to refer to the worldview an individual shares with his compatriots, and is contrasted with "anomy," that feeling of despair accompanying "worldlessness" (when one's worldview has been dismantled or threatened). For example, see Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967). So perhaps it is not too much of a stretch to read that culture (or, that part of culture identified as worldview, nomos) can also be seen as a tutor by which we may be "led to Christ, that we may be justified by faith." Clement of Alexandria similarly asserted that philosophy was the tutor for Greeks, "to bring the Hellenistic mind to Christ." Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds.,

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The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 2:305.

[9] "For the Word of God is living and active" (Heb 12:4). There are two kinds of energy that might be used to analogize and contrast the views of nature of the Word of God. 1.There is fossilized energy: petroleum and coal. There is a finite amount that, to be useful, is discovered and captured. 2. Organic energy is contained in living, or recently living things: plants and animals. This kind of energy is in temporary containers or forms. A plant, full of carbohydrates resulting from photosynthesizing sunlight and soil energy, is consumed by an animal, and the organic energy is transferred to the animal. Organic energy is not in a fixed form but is emergent. It is expressed contextually. When the power of the Word is viewed as fixed and fossilized it necessarily implies that we need to recover the pure form, ancient, limited, finite, precious. When viewing it as organic we necessarily understand it to be manifested in varying forms, within particular environments, adapted to changing contexts. Thinking of the Word of God as more like organic energy allows us to see it and Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, as a living being. Fossils were once alive but are no more. Organic energy is an objective, not subjective, thing. It is the enlivening element. It is life and spirit, passed on from one being to another. It required lineage, interaction, and relationship. It is not stored indefinitely. It has a shelf life, a lifespan. It needs to be passed on, not stored and protected. Each generation will be found manifesting a slightly different form.

[10] When one approaches cultural expressions of the Christian faith it soon becomes apparent that our traditional theological categories may not be robust enough to explain and settle. The determination of *adiaphora* as an abstraction and theoretical principle is readily grasped. However, the determination of what *is* and what is *not adiaphora* is much more troublesome, and the determination of it is highly contextual. Rather than an explanation, these categories are a description of an inherent tension that still needs explanation and resolution. For example, consider the practice of polygamy as practiced in many tribal communities. Our own missionaries are divided on this issue. Even if we invoke a Two Kingdoms approach we might not fare much better, as the Christian lives in both Kingdoms simultaneously. Our faith lives, as responses to the Gospel, are embodied in a particular place and time, subject to preference, interpretation and even political leanings. Whatever actions we take presuppose and privilege a particular set of proposals and assumptions while at the same time precluding others.

[11] It is difficult to overemphasize the power of culture in the shaping of a life. The cultural context provides the resources for us to live our lives. These cultural resources are both material and imaginative, and it is from resources that individuals negotiate their identities (out of the myriad of possible identities). Resources can enable and also limit. One can readily see this with material resources (and lack thereof), but this is just as true for the imaginative resources. For example, cultures produce and reinforce narratives of meaning which create a shared imaginative space of what is, what may be, and what will be, and what cannot be. The imaginative space, often hidden from view, is every bit as real as a material space. And just as one might have to clear obstacles in a material space, one might also have to negotiate obstacles in the imaginative space. I believe this is, at least in part, what Paul was doing here.

[12] For a fuller treatment of these propositions and an example of how culture impacts a faith response, the reader is invited to review the author's study of the Seminole Baptists of Oklahoma: Jack M. Schultz, *The Seminole Baptists of Oklahoma: Maintaining a Traditional Community* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

[13] See Eph 2:12–16: "Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope

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and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who had made us both one and had broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility," and Acts 2:39: "For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are
far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

[14] Even Christians are idolaters when we are more dedicated to our denominational institutions than we are to the living God. We are reminded of how critical Jesus was of the established religious institution of His day.

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Unfairness Is Not a Virtue: Exploring One of Critical Race Theory's Concerns

Matthew E. Borrasso

Abstract

The intent of this article is to explore the use of narrative within the field of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and offer some theological reflection on how it comports with Lutheran approaches to theology and ethics. Rather than offer an unfair, quick, or easy answer, this article offers extended engagement with recent scholarship in the field of CRT prior to critical analysis through both broadly Christian as well as specifically Lutheran lenses. Far from being an idea to reject wholesale, the narrative focus common to CRT can dovetail with Lutheran theological and ethical thought and approaches to life in the world.

Naming a Thing

It is difficult, though perhaps not impossible, to disagree with Esau McCaulley when he writes,

> *Peacemaking, then, cannot be separated from truth telling.* The church's witness does not involve simply denouncing the excesses of both sides and making moral equivalencies. It involves calling injustice by its name. If the church is going to be on the side of *peace* in the United States, then there has to be an honest accounting of what this country has done and continues to do to Black and Brown people. Moderation or the middle ground is not always

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> the loci of righteousness. Housing discrimination has to be named. Unequal sentences and unfair policing has to be named. Sexism and the abuse and commodification of the Black female body has to end. Otherwise any peace is false and nonbiblical. Beyond naming there has to be some vision for the righting of wrongs and the restoration of relationships. The call to be peacemakers is the call for the church to enter the messy world of politics and point toward a better way of being human.[1]

McCaulley, an Anglican priest and New Testament scholar at Wheaton College, wrote those words in his now famous work, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope.* While some might balk at his assertions about truth telling and naming, theologians who have been shaped by the Heidelberg Disputation would be hard pressed to do so. Why? Because Luther made a similar point when he said, "A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."[2] To be clear, Luther and McCaulley are not speaking into the same cultural and ecclesiastical moment. McCaulley's quote above, written in a book published during a year of unrest in the United States, is addressing the Church's role in what he terms as peacemaking. He affirms that the Church engages the society in which it lives from a biblically shaped perspective and that doing so requires naming injustice. Luther, on the other hand, engages in a scholastic debate concerning, among other things, the ability of the law to grant and sustain righteousness. It would be unfair to suggest they are speaking to the same thing, or even saying the same thing. It would be equally unfair to suggest they are saying completely different things. Both McCaulley and Luther, theologians separated by time, space, language, and a host of other theological, ecclesiastical, and cultural realities, understand the value in naming a thing what it is. The essay that follows is, in part, an attempt to name a thing what it is.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an often misunderstood, misapplied, and much maligned phrase. My goal is to offer a definition, explore some of its features, and ascertain the ways it might intersect with Lutheran theological expression. Before doing so, however, I want to begin by acknowledging that this topic can be incendiary. Some of what critical race theorists suggest, which will be explored below, is not comfortable. Because it can often be a divisive topic, because people so often retreat to what they half heard from a media personality, I want to caution against offering what Martin Franzmann once called "quick and easy answers."[3] Franzmann was no stranger to quarrels over ideas and conflicts that mattered. During the mid-twentieth century tumult in the Missouri Synod, Franzmann was often tasked with speaking into highly charged situations among disparate opinions and personalities.[4] Always irenic, Franzmann unfailingly displayed something the Church often fails to embody in those kinds of moments—charity. At the height of the controversy surrounding biblical authority and interpretation, Franzmann wrote the following:

> The questing mind of even pious man being what it is, and the history of many hypotheses in Biblical studies being what it is, one is tempted to render a quick and easy verdict: hypotheses are of the devil. But quick and easy answers are not always the best answers, and unfairness toward seriously

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> searching men is not a virtue. We shall do better to inquire seriously into the nature of an hypothesis, its value and limitations.[5]

Franzmann does not let the prevalence of sin in the minds of pious men or the lack of reverence for the Scriptures that hypotheses can produce prevent him from offering charity. In this essay I aim to follow in Franzmann's footsteps; I intend to be generative and not caustic because I agree that "quick and easy answers are not the best answers" and because I believe "unfairness toward seriously searching men is not a virtue." Exploring a topic like CRT demands such a posture not because the ideas are sacrosanct, but because the field of CRT is concerned with issues the Church should be concerned about, with what McCaulley, Luther, and Franzmann were concerned about—people. Put in its most positive light, CRT is interested in understanding why people experience life the way they do with the purpose of offering ways to ameliorate the undue burdens people experience. This essay, as much as it inquires seriously about ideas, is about people—practitioners in a controversial field as well as those subjects under consideration—all of whom are created in the image of God, all for whom Christ died and rose again. Such a reality does not mean that their ideas need to be accepted in part or in whole, but rather that it is unvirtuous to dismiss people for which Christ shed His blood, even if they are CRT scholars, theorists, and practitioners.

Inquiring Seriously

In a recent article, Villanova professor of sociology Glenn E. Bracey II[6] offers a historically contextualized definition of CRT. He writes,

> CRT developed in the United States in the late twentieth century as a thoroughgoing critique of how race shapes, and is shaped by, law (Crenshaw et al. 1995). This law-centered CRT had two analytical directions. First, it examined the effects of race on aspects of the law, such as jurisprudence, legislation, legal pedagogy, legislation, and enforcement (Crenshaw 1988; Gotanda 1991; Moore 2008). Second, CRT analyzed how law racializes every aspect of social life, such as constructing race (Haney-Lopez 2006); motivating racialized performances (Gulati and Carbado 2003); and limiting practicable rights in sexuality and reproduction (Bridges 2011; Roberts 1999), immigration (McKanders 2012), and privacy (Bridges 2017; P. Williams 1991). Since the 1990s, scholars have extended CRT to a range of disciplines, including political sociology (Bracey 2015), education (Ladson-BillingsTate 2016), philosophy (Jaima 2021), and psychology (Adams and Salter 2011), to name a few.[7]

Bracey's explication is helpful for at least two reasons. First, it rightly locates the origin of CRT within legal studies.[8] Second, it points out that the original locus was later applied to other areas of inquiry. Legal theory, and what other disciplines have

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done with it, are not the same thing. CRT has broad and narrow aspects and applications. Theorists and practitioners are not unilaterally or univocally agreed.[9] This actuality has caused Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic to write that "the critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power."[10] Moreover, CRT attempts to explain why the world is less just than it appears to be. Bracey insists that,

> CRT imagines a fair world, which would exist if not for abuses of power and defects in the social system. Against this heavenly utopia, CRT measures the empirical world and finds it wanting. The gap between the just utopia and the corrupted empirical world is the focus of CRT scholarship.[11]

Perhaps it is obvious, then, that CRT is not only difficult to define, but any definition is necessarily partial. I use the term "partial" in the sense that any definition of CRT only offers a piece of the concept and in the sense that it comes from a biased or even partisan source, as activists and scholars can certainly be partial in their treatment of topics. Again, this is why Bracey's definition is helpful: because it seeks to contextualize historically what is notoriously difficult to define. Any fair discussion of CRT must take the full reality of the concept into account.

Just because CRT is difficult to define does not mean it is impossible to address common themes or tenets apparent in the work of its practitioners.[12] Bracey's article is again helpful in that he lists six core tenets common within CRT that he sees as being derived from "Spiritual Principles."[13] It should be noted that, in his article, Bracey contributes to the broader CRT discussion by addressing a perceived desire in CRT scholarship for work that "accounts for the codefining quality of race, racism, and religion."[14] Bracey understands his work as demonstrating "CRT's utility by renewing the religion and spirituality-based critique of race law that undergirds early CRT . . . noting its founders' reliance on Christian tradition and the spiritual claims in its tenets."[15] Perhaps the very notion of CRT having tenets derived from or practitioners having Christian spirituality is unsettling, but it would be unfair to judge such a perspective without hearing the argument in full.[16] What, then, are those tenets described by Bracey?

> Those tenets are: (1) race is a social construction, created to justify European exploitation of other groups by establishing "whiteness" as the superior social status (Haney-Lopez 2006; Harris 1993); (2) racism is a normal outcome of U.S. institutions and social relations; racism is neither an occasional apparition nor detached from material production; when the normal operation of institutions and social norms disproportionately benefits white people, that is called "white supremacy"; (3) intersectionality—meaning people's multiple, interlocking identities position them differently in social structures—generates structurally specific needs and perspectives; (4) the Black-white binary focuses analysis on Black-white dynamics; however, scholars must transcend this binary because white racism is directed against all peoples of color, sometimes in ways that are different from how

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> whites target African Americans; (5) racism is permanent and has a polar, hierarchical structure, with whites on top and Black people on the bottom; and (6) narrative is essential.[17]

While it would be possible to explore each of the six tenets Bracey describes, such an endeavor would require more time and space than is pragmatic for an article of this kind. Thus, I intend to explore only one of the themes Bracey suggests is a common core tenet, one that he also argues is derived from spiritual principles, i.e., "narrative is essential."[18] Fairness and charity suggest that every single one of the tenets Bracey names be explored and heard on its own terms. I am choosing to explore narrative not simply because it is potentially the least controversial of the six tenets but more so because understanding narrative is, I hope to demonstrate, integral to Lutheran ethical discourse. In what follows I will explore Bracey's argument concerning narrative, assess it in broadly Christian terms, and then apply a distinctively Lutheran lens to it.

Hearing The Human

Bracey asserts that "CRT's commitment to narrative has two forms: context and communication."[19] We will deal with each in turn.[20] First,

> in terms of context, CRT rejects the traditional legal model which ignores social context in favor of the specific facts of a case, even when those facts are dependent on recognizing history and social structure (Moore 2014). Instead, critical race theorists insist on accounting for racial history and systemic racism. For example, the history of police violence against African Americans is relevant to why a Black motorist may drive an extra mile to a well-lit location before pulling over for an officer. In the absence of narrative, such behavior may be understood as resisting arrest, but in social context, it is simply seeking safety from a reasonable threat.[21]

Notice that Bracey is not making a false equivalency between the police violence that has historically happened (one need only think of the 1964 march in Selma to demonstrate the veracity of that claim) and the fact that not all police officers are historically violent against African Americans. Put differently, he is not saying that the police are inherently violent. Rather, he is using the example of police violence to explain why a Black motorist might act in a specific way. Context has explanatory power. The motorist is not resisting arrest as much as he or she is trying to embrace their own right to life and safety. Thus, it would be unfair to charge that individual with resisting arrest. The use of narrative to address the social context is not simply about excusal of an action, it is about generating a greater understanding of, and perhaps even sympathy for, the person who acted.

Communication is the second form that narrative takes in CRT. Bracey explains that,

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> narrative also means commitment to using fiction and other media to communicate legal truths to broader audiences. CRT recognizes stilted writing styles and excessive formalism as unnecessary barriers to people understanding the laws that govern them. Through fiction and other methods of storytelling, critical race theorists make legal knowledge and theorizing available to people beyond the walls of the academy.[22]

Narrative, then, is employed for the sake of education. Here one sees how something like CRT might begin to influence other fields, e.g., education.[23] This is not simply true because one of the goals is to educate but also because the purpose of using narrative is to understand the person as well as the situation in which they live. These two things are inextricably linked. In using narrative, CRT seeks to redress a power imbalance. Although one might hear the undertones of the Frankfurt School or Marxism in that language, perhaps another way to speak about what CRT is doing is that it aims to make accessible the democratization of knowledge so that people can not only be informed of their situation but also make use of the legal means to redress injustice.

It is one thing to see what CRT aims to do when it employs narrative; it is another to understand why. Bracey's explanation is worth hearing in full:

> In both cases—narrative as context and narrative as communication style—CRT seeks to recognize everyone's full humanity. Context is acknowledgment that people are not atomistic, strictly logical beings. People are emotional, as well as rational. They are connected to communities with histories and relationships. Their actions should be adjudicated in the context of their humanity, which includes the context of their social position. To do less is to reduce people to unreal, legal constructs rather than human beings. Similarly, hoarding legal knowledge disempowers everyday people and gives legal officials so much power that everyday people are functionally incapable of advocating on their own behalf (P. Williams 1991). By communicating in ways accessible to the non-legal public, critical race theorists attempt to restore a balance of power that better reflects the fundamental, spiritual equality of all people.[24]

Clearly, Bracey understands that CRT, through its commitment to and use of narrative, advocates for viewing people wholistically. Why employ narrative? Because people exist within the context of a society, and their lived reality, as well as the structure that supports or hinders it, needs to be communicated effectively.

While this tenet of CRT might not be overly controversial, the question must be asked, does this comport with Christian thought about people? Do Christians employ narrative to the same ends? The answer to both, I would suggest, is yes. Although he had Lutheran tendencies, Reinhold Niebuhr was not a Lutheran in the strictest sense. Yet, what Bracey describes within his discussion of the forms of narrative employed by CRT, Niebuhr seemed to express decades earlier. Niebuhr writes that, "there is no place in human history where the affairs of our fellowmen can be viewed in purely intellectual terms. We are always part of the drama of life which we behold; and the

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emotions of the drama therefore color our beholding. There is no novelty in this observation."[25] The context of Niebuhr's words does not undercut the similarity. The quotation comes from a sermon focused on Jesus' own words about hypocrites in Matthew 16:1–3. Niebuhr concludes the section that includes the quote above with the following:

> Thus it is that every party claim and every national judgment, every racial and religious prejudice, and every private estimate of the interests and virtues of other men, is something more and something less than a purely intellectual judgment. From the simplest judgment of our rival and competitor to the most ultimate judgment about the character of human history and the manner of its final fulfillment, we are tempted to error by our anxieties and our pride; and we seek to hide the error by pretension. We can not discern the signs of the times because we are hypocrites.[26]

Niebuhr sees the complexity of human life. He centers the discussion, however, differently than Bracey does. Whereas Bracey explicates narrative on the basis of understanding the other, Niebuhr does so on the basis of understanding the self. We are the hypocrites. Thus, if we are influenced by emotions, others might be too. Therefore, both Bracey, in explicating the tenet of CRT, and Niebuhr, in his sermon about hypocrites, see, in a different but related way, that people are rooted within a context, and that context must be understood. They may approach it from different ends, but they arrive at the same point.

Niebuhr does more than just speak about the context of the individual. He sees that society itself is buttressed by a context that has, at times, hampered the needed change:

> There is no social evil, no form of injustice whether of the feudal or the capitalist order, which has not been sanctified in some way or other by religious sentiment and thereby rendered more impervious to change. In a sense, the word of Marx is true: 'The beginning of all criticism is the criticism of religion.' For it is on the ultimate level that the pretensions of men reach their most absurd form. The final sin is always committed in the name of religion.[27]

Niebuhr is not interested in buttressing religion, but addresses the reality that religion has, at times, been culpable for fostering injustice. His comment on Marx is not a full-throated defense of Marx's idea, but it speaks to the reality that even Marx could have looked at some of the things religion has caused and labeled them problematic. Again, this speaks to the context side of the narrative equation and harkens to the example given by Brace about why a Black motorist might continue to drive because of a history of violence. But, it also speaks to Bracey's noted concern that CRT has for education, for people understanding the systems in which they

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participate, especially when it comes to understanding what has contributed to the support of those systems so as to work at redressing an imbalance.[28]

Having explored, then, the concept of narrative in CRT and shown broad connections to Christian thought, it is necessary to ask, is this concern for understanding the human situation so as to address it one that Lutherans can agree with? Again, I answer in the affirmative. Luther's Large Catechism is worth invoking at this point. In explaining the Fourth Commandment he writes,

> For if we want capable and qualified people for both the civil and spiritual realms, we must really spare no effort, time, and expense in teaching and educating our children to serve God and the world. We must not think only of amassing money and property for them. God can provide for them and make them rich without our help, as indeed he does daily. But he has given us children and entrusted them to us precisely so that we may raise and govern them according to his will; otherwise God would have no need of fathers and mothers. Therefore let all people know that it is their chief duty—at the risk of losing divine grace—first to bring up their children in the fear and knowledge of God, and, then, if they are so gifted, also to have them engage in formal study and learn so that they may be of service wherever they are needed.[29]

The Lutheran concern for education need not be defended further. The history of Missouri Synod and its commitment to education embodies Luther's urgent call. Notice, though, the purpose of education here expressed: for the Church and the world. Luther contextualizes education into the two realms and suggests that people need to be educated in the ways of the world if they are to engage in such action. Moreover, Luther contextualizes the vocation of father and mother. Fathers and mothers exist in part, at God's behest, for the sake of education. God has chosen parents, and indeed all people, to educate children so that those children might engage with the Church and world in service to God and their neighbor.

It would be unfair, however, to suggest that the Fourth Commandment was the only place Luther urged contextualized societal engagement. In his explanation of the Fifth Commandment Luther writes that "we must not kill, either by hand or heart, or word, by signs or gestures, or by aiding and abetting."[30] That general principle is elucidated later when he writes,

> This commandment is violated not only when we do evil, but also when we have the opportunity to do good to our neighbors and to prevent, protect, and save them from suffering bodily harm but fail to do so. If you send a naked person away when you could clothe him, you have let him freeze to death. If you see anyone who is suffering from hunger and do not feed her, you have let her starve. Likewise, if you see anyone who is condemned to death or in similar peril and do not save him although you have the means and ways to do so, you have killed him. It will be of no help for you to use the excuse that you did not assist their deaths by word or deed, for you have withheld your love from them and robbed them of the kindness by means of

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> which their lives might have been saved. . . . Therefore, it is God's real intention that we should allow no one to suffer harm but show every kindness and love. And this kindness, as I said, is directed especially toward our enemies. For doing good to our friends is nothing but an ordinary virtue of pagans, as Christ says in Matthew 5.[31]

Luther is not simply concerned with upholding an ideal but in explicating, in educating people, on how that ideal takes shape within the human situation. Luther puts a face on it. The love and kindness Luther suggests God wants to show through human beings and for human beings is contextually understood. You cannot know how to love and serve your neighbor if you do not understand your neighbor's context. You cannot love and serve your neighbor unless you have been educated to do so. This may not be a dynamic equivalent to what CRT is attempting to do, but it certainly speaks to the contextualization, to the humanization, at the heart of Lutheran ethical concerns evident in Luther's writing.

A recent commentary on Luther's Large Catechism further develops the point I have been attempting to make. In seeking to address contemporary application of the Fifth Commandment Warren Lattimore writes,

> There does not need to be blame or guilt for the church to act. Wherever we see suffering, we are called to bring healing, whether to a friend, an enemy, or a stranger . . . Whenever we have an opportunity to protect life, let us seize the moment. When we look to the cross, we remember the One who has not only reconciled us to God but who also reconciles us, one to another.[32]

Here Lattimore contextualizes Luther's perspective with the words "wherever" and "whenever." The Church is called to act, according to Lattimore, in the actual lives of people, whoever those people are, wherever those people are, and whenever the Church has the opportunity. The vagueness of the terms wherever and whenever demand concretization with a face and a time.

Lattimore does something more, however; he points his readers to cross of Christ and the love shown by Christ in reconciling the world to God and humanity to itself. This is also something Luther himself did in his Heidelberg Disputation when he distinguished between the two kinds of love: "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it."[33] Luther defends that thesis, writing,

> The second part is clear and is accepted by all philosophers and theologians, for the object of love is its cause, assuming, according to Aristotle, that all power of the soul is passive and material and active only in receiving something. Thus it is also demonstrates that Aristotle's philosophy is contrary to theology since in all things it seeks those things which are its own and receives rather than gives something good. The first part is clear because the love of God which lives in man loves sinners, evil persons, fools,

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> and weaklings in order to make them righteous, good, wise, and strong. Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.[34]

Luther distinguishes between these two loves in terms of who God is and what He has done rather than what is common between two people. For Luther, then, love is shaped by God's perspective of the sinner and not the actions, personality, or even the context of the sinner. People are lovable because God has loved them.

This does not, however, limit the argument I have attempted to make regarding contextualization and narrative. Love that is formed in the way Luther describes forces further contextualization. Building on the work of Alberto Garcia, Leopoldo A. Sanchez M. writes,

> In contrast to the human love taught by the philosophers and scholastics, Luther describes the love of the theologian of the cross as a love "which turns in the direction where it does not find good which it may enjoy, but where it may confer good upon the bad and needy person." Such love does not seek an attractive and likable object to love, but rather loves the unattractive and unlikable. What if Christians learned to love the refugee and immigrant other with such Christlike love? Such love would surely "call a thing what it is," acknowledge their sins, as with any sinner, without romanticizing them, denying them moral agency, or reducing them to victims. But such love would also acknowledge their humanity, needs, struggles, and hopes. Such a love would not merely point to that which is bad in people as an end in itself, but move toward thinking creatively about appropriate ways to bestow that which is good in them. Indeed, the love of the cross that moves Christians toward that which is not attractive may lead them to enter the world of the refugee and immigrant more deeply, listen to these neighbors' stories of migration, visit them in detention centers, pray for them and their families, company them to immigration court, assist with the payment of legal fees, advocate for them before elected government officials, or partner with pro-bono immigration services and other social agencies to offer them legal counsel and humanitarian assistance.[35]

Several features of Sanchez's work are worth highlighting. First, while addressing concerns about immigrants and refugees, Sanchez asks a question worth considering in any circumstance: "What if Christians learned to love . . . with such Christlike love?" You can insert any human being into the ellipses and the question loses none of its provocative power. Notice, though, that in speaking about refugees and immigrants, the love of Christ takes specific shape in terms of "entering into the world of the refugee and immigrant more deeply." The love of Christ, according to Sanchez, does not allow for a retreat from the world of the individual for whom Christ died. No, to employ a love shaped by Christ, one enters further. Furthermore, Sanchez does not let context become an all-encompassing excuse for behavior. Love shaped by the cross "calls a thing what it is"; it names the problems and speaks to the people, issues, and

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actions under consideration. After naming them, love continues to act. The love of Christ worked through the lives of sinners engages the world of the person; it attends to the structures as well as the person.

To borrow again from Niebuhr, "the motive is love, justice is the instrument."[36] This opens a range of discussions concerning CRT and the suggested means for ameliorating suffering—conversations which must take place. It would be unfair to suggest that Luther, or Lutherans, must agree with everything CRT asserts.[37] Such a scenario would not only prove improbable but impossible. Not all tenets of CRT are worth embracing. However, the use of narrative, and the reasons for its use, are common property of the Church and the special property of Lutherans who confess with Luther that our God intends to show kindness and love to human beings through human beings. This is something the Church has shown in the past, specifically where the issue of abortion is concerned. The Church has heard the cries of the mother and the infant; it has looked at the context that contributes to heartbreaking decisions, and it has educated itself on what can be done to ameliorate suffering for all parties involved through the enactment of legislation and the expansion of the social safety net. It has done so not because God's love has made sinners lovable. In that setting the Church understood that abortion was more than just a sin problem; it was rooted within a context that could be changed. Gustaf Aulen once commented that "the church's responsibility to the law of God is also a responsibility to social order. It must be a matter of first importance to the church that the law, whose requirement of love demands care for one's neighbor, be made decisive in the social order."[38] At bottom, the concern evident in Bracey's work explaining the use of narrative within CRT is just as evident in Niebuhr, Luther, Lattimore, and Sanchez. The concern is not simply for ideas and structures, but for people who are contextually located. Certainly, theologians of the Augsburg Confession are not permitted to retreat from that context.[39]

We Have More

Critical Race Theory is not easily defined, but it can be understood in terms of its origins, subsequent applications, and tenets. Much more can and should be said of the tenets of CRT and how they do or do not comport with Christian thought. The goal of this essay was to give a fair hearing to at least one of those tenets so as not to render the common quick and easy verdict that CRT is of the devil. One other helpful aspect of the Bracey essay under consideration above is the time he takes to explore the spiritual and religious motivations of CRT practitioners, including in one of its founders, Derrick Bell.[40] Bell is on record in a posthumously published essay, writing, "We know, for example, that the Resurrection of Christ could not and did not happen as a matter of science; yet, Christian religion calls upon the faithful to accept the Resurrection."[41] I wholeheartedly and emphatically disagree with Bell concerning his comments on the happening of the resurrection as a matter of science. Christianity does not simply call us to "accept the Resurrection" in some spiritual sense but as something that actually happened within time and space for the sake of all people.

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Knowing that Bell denied the resurrection in this way does not discount the work he tried to do for the sake of people. It would be unfair to dismiss wholesale what this seriously searching man sought to do for his neighbor no matter how defective his theological position might have been. Rather than dismiss him, I want to suggest that if someone who rejected the resurrection could be inspired by his faith to work for his neighbor, how much more could those who believe in it wholeheartedly? The Augsburg Confession is famously structured in such a way that it moves from recognizing the sinful state of all humanity to revealing God's answer to that problem, namely Jesus Christ. Articles IV, V, and VI then move in succession to confess what God has done in Christ, how we might receive justification, and then to where that justification leads us: into obedience. Luther spells out what that obedience looks like in the Large Catechism, especially where the Ten Commandments are concerned. While some in society might be motivated to justify themselves by their actions in the world, particularly when it comes to addressing structural disparity, those who confess the Augustana are not. We know who has justified us—Christ our Lord. We have been washed in that justification, we have heard that word of promise spoken to us, we have tasted and seen that the Lord is good. If others have motivation for their work in the world, we have more because we have been justified by our Lord and sent back to extend his love and kindness to the world. Unfairness, whether to a person or idea, or structuralized in society, is never a virtue; but love—shaped by the cross and resurrection of Christ—certainly is.

Endnotes

[1] Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 68–9. Emphasis in original.
[2] Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," trans. Harold J. Grimm, in Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer I,* ed. Harold J. Grimm, vol. 31, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia, PA/Minneapolis, MN: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86), 40.
[3] Martin H. Franzmann, "Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 125th Anniversary, 1972" (unpublished manuscript, 1972), physical copy available at Concordia Historical Institute, 9.
[4] At least three instances are of note. First, Franzmann was one of the faculty members tasked with responding to inquiries from students about the nature of the inspiration of Scripture. Second, Franzmann was selected to respond to Norman Habel's essay on Genesis 3. Third, Franzmann was asked to deliver a paper after the 1974 walkout at Concordia Seminary dealing with what is meant by "historical" and "critical." For more information on each of these episodes, see Matthew E. Borrasso, *The Art of Exegesis: An Analysis of the Life and Work of Martin Hans Franzmann* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019); "Martin Franzmann: Theologian In Between," (paper, 43rd Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions, Fort Wayne, IN, January 22–24, 2020); "To Begin At Home: An Exploration of Intellectual Hospitality in the Work of Martin Franzmann" (paper, 33rd Annual Theological Symposium, September 19–20, 2023, St. Louis, MO).
[5] Franzmann, "Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod," 9.
[6] "Glenn E. Bracey II is an assistant professor of sociology at Villanova University, where his scholarship focuses on critical race theory, social movements, and religion. Bracey is also co-principal investigator with Michael Emerson on the Race, Religion, and Justice Project (rrjp.org)." From a note about Bracey at the end of his article, "The Spirit of Critical Race Theory" *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 8, no. 4 (2022): 503–517.

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[7] Bracey II, "The Spirit of Critical Race Theory," 504. The names in parentheses refer to resources cited by Bracey in his essay. For further reading on Critical Race Theory, see Bracey's article as well as the references he cites.
[8] This is not to dismiss that CRT has roots reaching back at least as far as the Frankfurt School and Karl Marx but to suggest that although predecessor thought movements might contribute to present discussions, the actual field of study known as Critical Race Theory developed within the context of legal studies. For a helpful primer in CRT, see Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction,* 3rd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2017), the discussion of origins begins on page 4. Elsewhere I have noted the role Derrick Bell played in pioneering the field with his assessment of *Brown v. Board* as well as suggested that just because something comes from a flawed source does not mean it can be dismissed out of hand. See Matthew E. Borrasso, "The Boogeyman in the Belfry: An Appraisal and Apology of Critical Race Theory" *Lutheran Forum* 56, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 35–41.
[9] Again it is helpful to see Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, specifically pages 58–76 and 102–112.
[10] Delgado and Stefancic, 3.
[11] Bracey, "The Spirit of Critical Race Theory," 507. This understanding is offered as a competing narrative by CRT scholars to what Bracey suggests is present in "racially conservative legal scholars." He writes, "Racially conservative legal scholars presume a fair, 'divinely ordained' social system in which people have equal opportunities and outcomes result from merit. From that presumption, they conclude that those who succeed are 'the elect' of God. If successful people are disproportionately white men, it is only because the divine Creator chose it to be so." Here one sees the spiritual underpinnings perceived by certain critical race theorists like Delgado, namely, that "divine providence" is at work when the system is presumed to have an equality of opportunity.
[12] Among those tenets is the idea that "racism is ordinary, not aberrational." Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 8. For a list of basic tenets, see Delgado and Stefancic, 8–11.
[13] "Mainstream legal scholars and critical race theorists are equally tied to a religious logic structure. They must first assess the fairness of an inherited social system about which they can make only inferences. Granted, CRT relies on empiricism to demonstrate the greater veracity of its stance (Carbado and Roithmayr 2014). However, conservatism and CRT both involve a worldview with premises, threats of counterevidence, and reliance on belief in a world unseen. That is not to say that CRT is itself a religion, only that CRT recognizes and is sympathetic to the structure of religious thought. Indeed, CRT uses spiritual principles (e.g., starting with and pursuing an unseen ideal) as part of its method of analysis. In its logic structure and analytical method, CRT is compatible with religion (Witherspoon and Mitchell 2009), which is why it can recognize legal conservatism as a frame with a religious logic structure (Taylor 2006). Indeed, Bell (2006, quoted in Taylor 2006: 56) notes 'the religious faith-like foundation of so much racist belief and behavior based on those beliefs,' which CRT can claim is due to the theological idea that '[t]he racist replaces God as the source of value with self and race' (Taylor 2006: 56). In that way, legal racial conservatism and racism itself are false religions that place faith in self and race rather than God. CRT frees adherents from a false faith in racism by insisting on spirit, rather than race, as the source of value. Through direct comparison and contrasting use of religious tropes, CRT rejects the heresy of the mainstream jurisprudential theology of race on spiritual, empirical, and logical grounds." Bracey, "The Spirit of Critical Race Theory," 507.

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[14] Bracey, 503.
[15] Bracey, 503.
[16] Here again I commend Bracey's article (which is available via open access publication). He deftly demonstrates several theological and ecclesiastical structures that undergird expressions of law in the history of the United States.
[17] Bracey, 507.
[18] Bracey, 507.
[19] Bracey, 508.
[20] Again, my goal is to give Bracey a fair hearing, to see him as a seriously searching human, and not to prematurely adjudicate the veracity of his claim.
[21] Bracey, 508.
[22] Bracey, 508–9.
[23] One need only think of a course in ethnic studies or even the history of segregation in the United States that broadens the awareness of the "situatedness" of human beings within time and space. On a personal note, I find it curious that Lutherans would be afraid of their children being exposed to curriculum that does this. Whatever my own children might hear in a public school does not compare to what they hear their father confess in front of, and with, an entire congregation every week ("I, a poor miserable sinner . . . have not loved you with my whole heart, I have not loved my neighbor as myself").
[24] Bracey, "The Spirit of Critical Race Theory," 509.
[25] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 10.
[26] Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, 13.
[27] Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Christian Witness in the Social and National Order," in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 95. This is to say nothing of the fact that here Niebuhr could also be said to agree with what Bracey demonstrates throughout his article, namely where religion was fused with law in supporting problematic societal structures.
[28] One need only continue in Niebuhr's essay to see him make this explicit: "We have spoken negatively. The Christian Church must bear witness against every form of pride and vainglory, whether in the secular or in the Christian culture, and be particularly intent upon our own sins lest we make Christ the judge of the other and not of ourselves. But the experience of repentance does not stand alone. It is a part of a total experience of redemption. Positively our task is to present the Gospel of redemption in Christ to nations as well as to individuals." Niebuhr, "The Christian Witness," 97.
[29] Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 410.
[30] Luther, *The Book of Concord*, 411.
[31] Luther, 412.
[32] Warren L. Malueg-Lattimore, "The Fifth Commandment: Hatred as Murder," in *Luther's Large Catecism with Annotations and Contemporary Applications*, ed. John Pless and Larry Vogel (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2022), 347.
[33] Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," 41.
[34] Luther, 57.
[35] Leopoldo A. Sanchez M., "Beyond Facebook Love: Luther's Two Kind of Love and the Immigrant Other" *Concordia Journal* 46, no. 4 (Fall 2020): 31–2.
[36] "The Meaning of the Birmingham Tragedy, 1963," interview by Thomas Kilgore, *Our Protestant Heritage*, September 15, 1963, video, 29:35, https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/object/islandora:71692.

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[37] B. Keith Haney has written about being open to new ideas, especially those related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and CRT. See B. Keith Haney, "What are We Missing with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion?" *Becoming Bridge Builders* (blog), August 7, 2023, https://www.becomingbridgebuilders.org/post/what-are-we-missing-with-diversity-inclusion-and-equity; "Building a True Authentic Community," *Becoming Bridge Builders* (blog), August 14, 2023, https://www.becomingbridgebuilders.org/post/building-a-true-authentic-community. Additionally, I have written about this elsewhere. See Matthew E. Borrasso, "The Boogeyman in the Belfry," 35–41. Furthermore, I am remined of the following quote from Martin Franzmann in the same 125th Anniversary address referenced earlier in this essay: "None of these aberrations is inevitable. But we need to keep them in mind if only to persevere our nonchalance over against any untried hypothesis and our sense of balanced reserve even over against any hypothesis, however widely accepted. I remember a three-year-old boy's remark after hearing all the arguments as to whether a piece of linoleum would fit into a certain space in the neighbor's kitchen: 'Let's lay the fool thing down and see if it fits.' The hypothesis calls for neither adoration nor anathema. Let us just lay the fool thing down and see if it fits." Franzmann, "Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod," 12.
[38] Gustaf Aulen, "The Church and Social Justice," in *This is the Church: Basic Studies on the Nature of the Church*, ed. Anders Nygren (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1952), 318.
[39] AC XVI demands that we recognize societal structures as emanating from God and encourages our participation in them. We are not allowed to retreat from society.
[40] Bracey, "The Spirit of Critical Race Theory," 509–10.
[41] Derrick Bell, "Law as a Religion, " *Case Western Reserve Law Review* 69, no. 2 (Winter 2018): 265.

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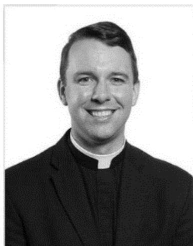
Confessions Contingent on Culture: Exactly How Jesus Wanted Them

Christian J. Einertson

Abstract

While the cultural distance between the confessional writings of the Book of Concord and today's mission contexts is readily apparent, how Lutherans should navigate that cultural distance is less apparent. In this essay, Einertson considers three potential approaches to navigating the cultural differences between the situations of the Lutheran symbols and the situations of today's Lutherans before outlining an approach that is faithful both to the way in which our Lord Jesus has called His Church to continue His mission in the world and to the way in which the confessional writings themselves understand that mission.

However one understands the concept of culture,[1] it is hard to disagree that the Lutheran Church's confessional writings arose within and bear the marks of cultures that differ significantly from the cultures in which twenty-first-century Christians are called to witness to their faith. The cultural distance between the confessional writings and today's mission contexts is readily apparent for missionaries whose task is to articulate the Christian (and yes, Lutheran) faith in lands physically far-removed from Nicaea and Augsburg, and in languages that bear virtually no resemblance to the Indo-European languages of the Book of Concord. Yet even in Germany, the Book of Concord's own native land, the cultural distance between the late-sixteenth-century Germany of its publication and the twenty-first-century Germany in which Lutherans are trying to read it has presented an obstacle for those who want to understand those confessional writings better. This obstacle is apparently significant enough that some Lutheran church bodies have translated the symbolical books into a form that will be more understandable to readers who lack the familiarity with Latin, Greek, and Early



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New High German required to navigate the 1580 editions of these confessional writings.[2]

For clergy and mission organizations who have bound themselves to the Lutheran symbols, this cultural distance necessarily raises the question, how should Lutherans navigate the cultural distance between their confessional writings and the contexts in which the Lord has called them to carry out His mission today? Different Lutherans have attempted various approaches for dealing with this cultural distance, yet not all of them have been faithful or even workable. In this essay, I will examine a few approaches that can be found in the literature on the Lutheran symbols before outlining one that is faithful both to the way in which the Lord Jesus has called His Church to continue His mission in the world and to the way in which the confessional writings themselves understand that mission.

Possible Approaches

Theologians who have written on the Lutheran symbols have indicated a variety of approaches that Lutherans could take as they navigate the cultural difference between their confessional writings and their own situations. While it is admittedly lacking for proponents, one of the possible approaches to negotiating that cultural distance that many authors mention is remarkably straightforward: ignore it. That is to say, one way to approach the cultural distance is to deny that there is one and assume that the people one is addressing come from and inhabit a culture that is—at least fundamentally—the same as those wherein the Lutheran symbols were originally articulated. Such an approach amounts to what Horst Georg Pöhlmann, Torleiv Austad, and Friedhelm Krüger call repristination in their theology of the confessional writings.[3] Gunther Wenz expresses a concern similar to that of Pöhlmann, Austad, and Krüger when he describes Lutherans who want to appropriate the Augustana and the other confessional writings for their own time without any attempt to account for the historical distance between 1530 and today, a move that he calls reactionary. Among the partisans for such a reactionary, repristinating approach, Wenz singles out the Confessional Revival, of which the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is undoubtedly a theological heir.[4]

Wenz's accusations notwithstanding, it would be hard to believe that there are Lutherans today who are trying to follow such a repristinating approach to navigating this cultural distance in a thoroughgoing way. Yet regardless of whether or not this approach is actually used in current Lutheran mission work, it is ultimately bound to fail. The reasons for its necessary demise are many, but perhaps the foremost is that a repristinating approach is willfully ignorant of the specific time and place in which the Lord has called His Church to engage with the people for whom He died. Consequently, it is easy enough to dispense with repristination as a serious strategy.

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Perhaps a more academic approach to navigating the cultural difference between the symbols and today's mission fields would be to reduce the doctrinal content of the confessional writings to an essential core that does not bear the marks of culture—in other words, to find some a-cultural Lutheran doctrine—and then apply that core to the mission context in question. One of the prominent mid-twentieth-century commentators on the Lutheran symbols, Friedrich Brunstäd, attempts something like this when he tries to identify the "doctrinal intention" of the confessional writings, by which he means the "the testimony to the truth of the gospel" that he believes is the main goal of the confessional writings. He distinguishes this "doctrinal intention" from the "doctrinal form," which is "the way in which this testimony is shaped in the religious-historical situation of the time, within its means of thought."[5] Consequently, the goal of Brunstäd's theology of the Lutheran confessional writings is not to promote the explicit doctrinal assertions of the Lutheran symbols in all of their chronological and cultural specificity but rather to arrive at the doctrine *behind* those assertions, a doctrine that is essentially removed from the contingencies of time and culture. Of course, for Brunstäd, the more time-bound—and we could add culturally-bound—a particular confessional writing is, the greater the distance between the confessional writing itself and its "doctrinal intention" and the more work that the theologian must do to arrive at that doctrinal core. In his view, the Formula of Concord is by far the most time-bound document in the Book of Concord since it devotes so much of its efforts to addressing the concrete controversies of mid-sixteenth-century Germany,[6] which is why Brunstäd struggles mightily at times to find the enduring "doctrinal intention" of various articles in the Formula.[7] Yet he claims throughout his book to have located this enduring doctrinal core that is free of much of the confessional writings' inherent cultural and chronological specificity. A similar approach to the confessional writings can be found in the work of Friedrich Mildenberger, whose theological approach boils the doctrinal significance of the confessional writings down to the major decisions that he identifies at their core, not the explicit doctrinal statements that they make.[8]

Such an approach to navigating the cultural distance between confessional writing and mission by finding some a-cultural doctrinal core will necessarily fail since it is not possible to find a doctrinal core to the confessional writings that is in no way culturally contingent. First, the approach must finally collapse under the weight of its own methodology as even Brunstäd recognizes the difficulty of having no other means to access the Book of Concord's "doctrinal intention" than the culturally contingent confessional writings themselves.[9] For their part, mission-minded leaders within the Missouri Synod have long realized that this kind of approach to the confessional writings suffers from a lack of workability. To take a prominent example, C. F. W. Walther opposed this sort of subscription to the Lutheran symbols, which he called a "rationalist" subscription to their "spirit" instead of their letter. After all, he insisted, the only thing capable of conveying the spirit of the symbols is their letter, so any

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attempt to undermine the latter will necessarily impede the reader's access to the former.[10] So any attempt to find an a-cultural doctrinal core to the confessional writings that can then dispense with their culturally conditioned doctrinal assertions is doomed to failure from the outset.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, whenever a person attempts to find a doctrinal core behind the doctrinal statements made in the Book of Concord, he is bound to make those statements more abstract until he reaches something that seems sufficiently removed from the original context as to be no longer contingent on culture. Yet if Lutherans want to follow that approach, they must answer the question, to what level of abstraction can they faithfully abstract confessional doctrine? At a sufficiently high level of abstraction, all Christian confessional writings from the Augsburg Confession to the Westminster Confession of Faith and from the Thirty-Nine Articles to the Schleitheim Confession[11] presumably have the same doctrinal core—or to borrow Brunstäd's expression, doctrinal intention—to confess Jesus Christ faithfully. Yet at that point, the Lutheran confessional writings lose their intended symbolical character entirely,[12] and once someone has begun to abstract the doctrinal content of the confessional writings to find a less contingent doctrinal core, it seems impossible to find a limiting principle that will ensure faithfulness to the confessional writings and prevent him from reaching such a plainly unacceptable level of abstraction. For at least these two reasons, Lutherans should be wary of any attempt to locate an a-cultural doctrinal core behind the confessional writings themselves to which they will then commit themselves.

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Yet another possible way to handle the cultural distance between the confessional writings and contemporary mission contexts has the advantage of being less complicated than the last, though it is unlikely to gain many adherents among the readership of this article. This third approach is quite simply to disregard the doctrinal content of the confessional writings when engaging in mission because the cultural distance between those writings and the mission context in question is sufficiently great to render the confessional doctrine functionally useless. For an example of this sort of approach, one can look to George Tinker, who denies the confessional writings any universal value or validity, especially for those who come from non-European cultures.[13] While he focuses most closely on his own American Indian culture in his article, Tinker writes that he thinks it is difficult enough to impose confessional doctrine on twenty-first-century white Americans who are five centuries removed

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from the confessional writings, not to mention non-white cultures who he believes to be at an even greater cultural distance from the Book of Concord.[14] Unfortunately, this sort of approach is neither faithful nor honest for Lutheran church workers who have pledged to make the confessional writings their own confession,[15] so it can be quickly dispensed with in this forum.

In short, while each of the three approaches outlined above may be attractive to some Lutherans who are tasked with navigating the cultural distance between their confessional writings and the contexts in which they are called to carry on the Lord's mission, none of them is a faithful method for doing so. Yet the distance clearly must be navigated. In the remainder of this essay, I hope to outline a faithful way for Lutherans to do so.

A More Faithful Approach

For both practical and theological reasons, Lutherans must begin the process of navigating the cultural difference between the Lutheran confessional writings and the contexts in which twenty-first-century Lutherans attempt to communicate Lutheran doctrine by acknowledging that the distance exists. On the practical side, this honest appraisal of the cultural situation is necessary for effective communication—a Lutheran pastor in 2023 in Los Angeles who responds to an inquiry about original sin by quoting the first article of the Solid Declaration in German is unlikely to receive much of a hearing.

Beyond mere practicality, however, there are good theological reasons why Lutherans must admit the existence of this cultural distance that begin with the self-understanding of the confessional writings themselves. Upon close examination, it becomes clear that the Lutheran confessional writings are keenly aware of the cultural distance between historical symbols and contemporary confessions of faith. A good example of this awareness is the way in which the Book of Concord handles the ecumenical creeds. To take but one, the Book of Concord's full title for the *Quiqunque vult* is "the Third Confession or the one called the Creed of Athanasius, which he made against the heretics called Arians and which reads as follows."[16] While recent scholarship may be reticent to accept the attribution of this creed to Athanasius's own pen,[17] the compilers of the Book of Concord make it clear in this title that they understand that this earlier confessional text was produced in a certain cultural situation and to oppose theological opponents that were significantly removed from their own.

Moreover, those who assembled this confessional corpus were aware of cultural shifts much less seemingly profound than the thousand years and many hundreds of miles separating the compositions of the Athanasian Creed and the Formula of Concord. The later sixteenth-century confessional writings are even aware of their cultural distance from the symbols produced in the earlier part of that century. This

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much is clear from the preface to the Book of Concord, which states clearly that the Augustana was produced in a situation where the Evangelical position had to be distinguished from the papacy and other factions, while the Formula was produced in a situation where the Evangelicals needed to resolve disputes that had arisen within their own ranks.[18] This betrays a cultural shift that had taken place within the Evangelical estates, a shift that meant that the papacy, for example, was no longer as significant a cultural force in the 1570s as it was in 1530, though its continuing influence in Germany at that point should not be underestimated.[19] Since the later symbols explicitly accept the earlier symbols as authoritative,[20] it is plain that the Book of Concord itself is more than comfortable with the idea of a cultural distance between binding historic confessional writings and situations in which the faith must be articulated anew. As heirs of that confessional corpus, twenty-first-century Lutherans need not feel any less comfortable about this reality.

Once the Lutheran has acknowledged the distance between the cultures of the symbolical books and his own cultural situation, he must abandon any attempt to find a doctrinal content of the confessional writings that is not in any way shaped by or contingent on culture. This is partially because, as was explained above, any attempt to find such an a-cultural expression of doctrine will inevitably fail, yet it is also a reflection of the confessional writings' own self-understanding. The Lutheran symbols frequently and evidently depend on the unique cultures from which they arose to express their doctrinal content. A couple of examples should suffice to make this point. First, at the crux of the Nicene Creed and the debate surrounding its adoption is the confession that Christ is "of one substance with the Father."[21] This assertion of consubstantiality must be understood in light of the Hellenistic cultural context of the Nicene fathers and its longstanding discussions about οὐσία.[22]

Similarly, the sixteenth article of the Augsburg Confession defends Christian involvement with temporal authority by permitting Christians to serve in "just wars,"[23] an expression of approval that is inextricably culturally contingent insofar as the just war tradition to which the Augustana alludes is a product of a particular stream of Western Christian thought with roots extending back to Plato and Aristotle and continuing through Augustine and Aquinas.[24] These two significant examples are proof enough that it is not possible to eliminate culturally contingent expressions of doctrine from the doctrinal content of the confessional writings. The

> Consequently, Lutherans must figure out how to reckon with the reality of culturally continent doctrine as they endeavor to bring the Gospel to mission contexts seemingly far removed from the cultures in which that doctrine was articulated.

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ὁμοούσιος and the approbation of just war undeniably belong to the doctrinal content of the Lutheran symbols, even as they are undeniably contingent on the cultures that gave rise to those writings. Consequently, Lutherans must figure out how to reckon with the reality of culturally continent doctrine as they endeavor to bring the Gospel to mission contexts seemingly far removed from the cultures in which that doctrine was articulated.

Given that the symbols to which they bind themselves are self-consciously filled with culturally contingent doctrine, Lutherans should engage with that doctrine with gratitude for the cultures through which God has decided to bring them the Word of God and the culturally contingent doctrinal assertions that arose within them. After all, as Arthur Carl Piepkorn wrote, the adherents of the Augsburg Confession have always recognized the "limitations of space and time, of environment and heredity, of history and of geography."[25] This is to say that conscientious Lutherans are aware that they have received the Word of God because a first-century Semite proclaimed that Word to the people of the Levant and instituted a *Predigtamt*[26] that then spoke that Word to a Hellenistic world. From there the *Predigtamt* delivered that Word to the inhabitants of Rome, and it later brought the Word from there to Germany. As the Lord Jesus instituted it, the *Predigtamt* has unavoidably been taken up by men from those particular cultures with the result that each of those cultures left indelible marks on the Christian faith that modern-day Lutherans have received. Moreover, for some Lutherans, the chain of cultural custody extends even further. Some are Christians today because the *Predigtamt* passed that Word further north to Scandinavia, and others because it brought that Word from Scandinavia to Japan, and so on. By instituting a *Predigtamt* that would only be occupied by particular men who lived in their particular cultures, the Lord demonstrated that the aforementioned process is how he desires for his mission to be done. Lutherans need not be ashamed of this reality. Rather, they can give thanks to God for the way in which the divinely instituted *Predigtamt* goes about its divinely ordained task for the salvation of souls, leaving the cultural imprints of the office-bearers who took it up from generation to generation on the faith that they handed down.

As such, Lutherans realize that the classical Hellenistic world of the Nicene Creed and the early modern Germanic world of the Augustana are contexts in which the Spirit has worked to bring the Word to them, and they acknowledge that they cannot receive the Christian faith without the marks that those cultures made on it. To put a fine point on the topic, it is not possible for a Christian after the Council of Nicaea to receive the faith without reckoning with the Hellenistic thinking inherent in the ὁμοούσιος. After all, the holders of the *Predigtamt* arrived at that exceedingly Hellenistic expression in their formulation of the creed, and ever since that point in history, the ὁμοούσιος is quite simply a bell that cannot be un-rung. In the same way, those who have learned the faith from the heirs of the age of Lutheran confessionalization[27]—in this category one must include the Missouri Synod and her daughter church bodies—cannot pretend

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to discuss questions of Christian liberty as if the Adiaphorist controversy[28] had never taken place, nor can a Norwegian Lutheran in America try to avoid the legacy of the Predestination Controversy and the *Opgjør*'s two forms of the doctrine of election when he talks about how Christians can find certainty in their salvation.[29] These kinds of culturally contingent expressions of doctrine are part of many Christians' doctrinal heritage through which the Holy Spirit has used the *Predigtamt* in particular cultures to bring them to faith, and they are not free to ignore them. Consequently, they may accept them as culturally contingent expressions of doctrine that are in line with the Word of God, they may reject them, or they may try to nuance them, but they must account for them in one way or another. In the case of the faithful Lutheran clergyman or missionary, he has already accepted that the culturally contingent expressions of doctrine found in the Lutheran confessional writings accord with the Word of God, which is to say that the *Predigtamt* acted faithfully in composing them, by virtue of his confessional subscription.

So how does the Lutheran then apply the doctrine of the confessional writings to the context in which the Lord calls him to continue his mission? If he encounters a situation that closely resembles the situation addressed in the confessional writings, he will likely want to respond in much the same way that they did since he has already accepted their response as true. For example, a Lutheran missionary in a predominantly Roman Catholic area may very well be asked the question, "Why do your priests have wives and children?" In such a situation, the cultural distance between his interlocutor and the situation of CA XXIII may well be negligible with regards to the question at hand, and while the text of CA XXIII does make certain true statements with a particular relevance to sixteenth-century German culture,[30] the twenty-first century missionary will likely be able to employ the same lines of reasoning or perhaps even some of the same words as the Augustana to demonstrate the faithfulness of the Lutheran practice of married priests.

Yet one of the natural consequences of the cultural distance between the confessional writings and modern-day missions is that Lutherans are likely to encounter situations that do not so nearly resemble those that the confessional writings were intended to address. For example, a twenty-first-century Lutheran pastor in the United States is unlikely to be asked whether original sin is the substance of human nature or accidental to it as the Formulators were compelled by the Flacian controversy to determine.[31] If someone were to ask him that question, he could respond in much the same terms as the Formula of Concord since he has already determined that the Formula's hamartiology is consistent with the rule of faith. However, the question that the Formula had to answer was in many ways contingent on the Aristotelian metaphysics that dominated the academy of sixteenth-century Germany,[32] a condition that hardly resembles the twenty-first-century American academy, or for that matter the rest of American culture. For his part, the twenty-first-century pastor in the United

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States is far more likely to encounter the following question: "Pastor, I'm not sure what to do about my son. He's told me that he's started dating other men, and I know that that's a sin, but he says he's always felt this way. I think it's just part of who he is. So shouldn't I just accept him for who he is, homosexuality and all?" This question reflects American cultural realities like the sexual revolution[33] that are entirely foreign to the Book of Concord. Yet the doctrinal content of FC I is not unrelated to the question of how Lutherans should address the situation of those who say that they are "born this way." In such situations, the Lutheran should recognize the cultural distance between the relevant confessional text and the present situation, receive the confessional text as a faithful response to an earlier culturally contingent situation, and accept it as the settled foundation upon which to build his own response to a new culturally contingent situation, much as the confessional writings themselves once did with the earlier confessional writings.[34]

How, then, should Lutherans account for the cultural distance between their confessional writings and the situations in which they are called to do mission? Of course, they will need prudence and discernment as they figure out how to respond to the situations that confront them in their own particular cultural contexts, but the approach outlined above should give them a way to do so that is faithful both to the confessional writings themselves and to the way in which the Lord Jesus has ordained that mission should be carried out—by particular men from particular cultures in particular cultures—until he comes again.

Endnotes

[1] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 3–5, 33–37. Geertz demonstrates that the definition of the word "culture" is hardly a settled matter.
[2] Vereinigte Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche Deutschlands, ed., *Unser Glaube: Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, 6th ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013).
[3] Horst Georg Pöhlmann, Torleiv Austad, and Friedhelm Krüger, *Theologie der Lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996), 9.
[4] Gunther Wenz, *Theologie der Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche: Eine Historische und Systematische Einführung in das Konkordienbuch*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 35; Eric W. Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 181–187.
[5] Friedrich Brunstäd, *Theologie der Lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1951), 9.
[6] Brunstäd, *Theologie der Lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften*, 13.
[7] See, for example, Brunstäd, 41–47.
[8] Friedrich Mildenberger, *Theologie der Lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1983); Friedrich Mildenberger, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, ed. Robert C. Schultz, trans. Erwin L. Leuker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Rune Söderlund, "Review of *Theologie der Lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften*, by Friedrich Mildenberger,"

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[11] John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 192–230, 266–281, 282–292.
[12] For an exemplary explanation of the confessional writings' symbolical character written by a leader in Lutheran mission in Africa, see Nelson Unwene, *Understanding Lutheranism Through Her Augsburg Confession* (Ikot Ekpene, Nigeria: The Lutheran Heritage Foundation West Africa Co-ordinating Office, 2011), esp. 11–14.
[13] George Tinker, "Decolonizing the Language of Lutheran Theology: Confessions, Mission, Indians, and the Globalization of Hybridity," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 50, no. 2: 193–205. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6385.2011.00603.x.
[14] Tinker, "Decolonizing the Language," 198.
[15] *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 166.
[16] Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000, henceforth BC), 23.
[17] Ian A. McFarland, "Athanasian Creed," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Ian A. McFarland, David A. S. Fergusson, Karen Kilby, and Iain R. Torrance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 40–41.
[18] BC, 5–9.
[19] Indeed, the papacy continued making inroads into German lands during the Reformation era, largely through the work of Jesuits like Peter Canisius. See, for example, Philipp Überbacher, "Petrus Canisius und sein Beitrag zum Beginn der katholischen Reform im Tirol des 16. Jahrhunderts," *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 119, no. 4 (1997): 377–396.
[20] BC, 527–28.
[21] Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 102.
[22] For one scholarly attempt to explain some of the relevant cultural context, see Pier Franco Beatrice, "The Word '*Homoousios*' from Hellenism to Christianity," *Church History* 71, no. 2 (June 2002): 243–72.
[23] BC, 48.
[24] Steven P. Lee, *Ethics and War: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 38–50.
[25] Secker, *Sacred Scriptures*, 81.
[26] BC, 40.
[27] Irene Dingel, "Confessional Transformations from the Wittenberg Reformation to Lutheranism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 1–25.
[28] Irene Dingel, ed., *Der Adiaphoristische Streit (1548–1560)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).
[29] Christian Einertson, "Caught Between Norway, Denmark, and Missouri: The Confessional Identity of the Norwegian Synod from 1853 to 1917," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 94, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 38–42.
[30] For example, CA XXIII 14 in BC, 64–65.
[31] Charles P. Arand, Robert Kolb, and James A. Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of The Book of Concord*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 201–11.

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[32] Norman Kretzmann et al., eds., *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Recovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism 1100–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge, University Press, 1982).
[33] For more on the cultural factors that have given rise to situations like this, see Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).
[34] For example, BC, 37, 524.

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Reforming *Homo Consumens*: Consumer Culture, Consumerism, and Contemporary Christian Witness

William G. Fredstrom

God's people work, play, live, worship, pray, and witness in cultures and societies with various institutions, problems, ideas, neighbors, and conflicts. Because Christians live within such varying cultural contexts, many desire to maintain a clear distinction between themselves and the cultures in which they live.[1] Theologians have described the distinctiveness of God's people amid their secular cultures by describing the Church as its own culture or public constituted by unique narratives, rituals, and practices that contrast the narratives, rituals, and practices of other surrounding cultures.[2]

On one hand, describing the Church as its own culture preserves the distinctiveness and peculiarity of the Church's proclamation and confession. On the other hand, it muddles the truth that nearly everything that goes on in a church—preaching, teaching, administration, catechesis, and pastoral care—is inadvertently shaped by the various narratives, rituals, and practices present in the cultural milieu where that church is embedded. With this tension in mind, this paper explores how a particular aspect of the North American social imaginary shapes and forms the lives and witness of God's people today: consumer culture and consumerism.[3]

When God's people live in a consumer culture, their understanding of the individual, the neighbor, God, and the Church can be malformed.[4] Critically, this paper seeks to show what these malformed understandings might look like in theory and practice. Constructively, by drawing on central themes and insights from Lutheran theology, this paper seeks to demonstrate how a more faithful understanding of the individual, the neighbor, God, and the Church helps God's people offer a more beautiful and compelling description of these entities as they witness to their neighbors in our secular age.

First, it is necessary to understand the economic system that enables consumerism to thrive and consider how consumerism, and economics more broadly, has come to function as a religion in our secular age with its own corresponding understanding of justification rooted in identity formation and social distinction.

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Forming Our Imaginations: Neoliberalism, Detachment, and Advertising

Many economists and social commentators contend that the current economic system that dominates the West and the rest of the world is a particular form of capitalism called neoliberalism.[5] Political theorist Wendy Brown has argued that the neoliberal vision of life has captured the imagination of all participants, whether persons or institutions and those with political leanings to the left or right. "The norms and principles of neoliberal rationality do not dictate precise economic policy," Brown writes, "but rather set out novel ways of conceiving and relating state, society, economy, and subject."[6] Neoliberalism cannot simply be reduced to economic policy; instead, it is a more encompassing account of narratives, rituals, and practices that shape and form the imaginations of its participants.

In a neoliberal system of economics, the global market economy is seen as the dominant phenomenon that shapes socio-cultural and political factors in contemporary life.[7] The functional apotheosis of the market has led to what Brown calls "a new 'economization' of heretofore noneconomic spheres and endeavors."[8] To describe the pervasiveness of this new economization concretely, let us briefly consider the goal and purpose of the contemporary university.

Without idealizing or romanticizing an older model of university education rooted in the humanities, the classics, theology, and music, much of this model was seen as personally and socially advantageous. Interacting with the great literature and thinkers of previous eras was meant to sharpen the learner's critical thinking skills and character. However, this model of education is now seen as inconsequential, even a waste of time, energy, and potential. Why?

Much of this change in sentiment is due to the cultural agreement that a student's growth in diverse forms of knowledge and critical thinking skills is far less important than ensuring the student gains a technical proficiency that will allow her to succeed in the marketplace.[9] While universities are contemporary locations of immense ideological and value formation, few values are held in higher esteem than to help students get a "big shovel" in the marketplace when they graduate.

Neoliberalism's story and novel way of imagining the world can be observed in the ascendency and dominance of consumer culture. Many have argued that consumer culture brought about a historically unprecedented attachment to material objects. In a sense this is true, but it is not the whole story. People do not simply want things; they want *different* things and *more* of them. Theologian William Cavanaugh argues that "What really characterizes consumer culture is not attachment to things but detachment. People do not hoard money; they spend it. People do not cling to things; they discard them and buy other things."[10] Things are desired, acquired, and then discarded to make room for new desires and acquisitions. As a result, consumerism is not so much about having but having something else. "It is not simply *buying*," Cavanaugh writes, "but *shopping* that is at the heart of consumerism."[11] The desire for more is always present because "possession kills desire; familiarity breeds

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contempt."[12] But how are these desires created and put into the hearts and minds of the consumer? Advertising.

Canadian humorist Stephen Butler Leacock has said, "Advertising is the art of arresting the human intelligence just long enough to get money from it." But advertising has a more purposeful goal than this. Advertising seeks to convince the consumer that the advertised product can actually change her life.[13] More often than not, advertisers present a product as something that will fill the consumer's life with meaning and hope in an otherwise mundane, boring, and even painful life.[14] In 2022, consumers spent 9.12 billion dollars online shopping on Black Friday.[15] Clearly, the desire to fill "the aching void" through material objects is alive and well in our secular age.

But why is the clutch of consumerism so great? Why do we consume the way we do, even if we know intuitively and from experience that things do not ultimately bring happiness or fulfillment? Why do people often look to their belongings as their source of meaning, identity, and security? Sociologically and historically speaking, the transition from an agricultural to an industrial society, from a Fordist to a post-Fordist society, and the move from a production to a consumer society are all necessary to describe how we have arrived at our contemporary social imaginary.[16]

However, the following section focuses on another set of reasons that help us understand the all-encompassing formative power of consumer culture and consumerism by describing how economics and consumerism have come to function as a religion in our secular age with its own corresponding understanding of justification rooted in identity formation and social distinction.

"Religion" in A Secular Age: Economics, Consumerism, and Justification by Distinction

Few theoretical accounts have described the cultural underpinnings and assumptions of the contemporary West with such erudition and persuasiveness as Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age.*[17] Taylor wonders, "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000, many of us find this not only easy but even inescapable?"[18] To answer this question, Taylor weaves a lengthy story describing several critical transitions concerning the self, society, the natural world, and God over the past 500 years in the West.

Central to this transition is how the conception of the self has changed from *porous*, or vulnerable to divine grace, action, and outside forces, to *buffered*, or turned inward, no longer vulnerable to transcendent forces, and able to set "its own autonomous order to its life."[19] The buffered self is essential for establishing what Taylor calls "exclusive humanism," an understanding of the self and society wherein "fullness" and flourishing is found solely in this-worldly objects and goals *apart* from any transcendent horizon or source, i.e., God.

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Another critical transition Taylor describes is the great disembedding of Western society. Before this period in history, almost every person in the West assumed they were embedded in society, that society fit into the wider cosmos, and that the cosmos incorporates the divine.[20] However, the great disembedding led to a new understanding of reality wherein human persons began to imagine a life disembedded from the social order, and the social order began to be seen as untethered from the cosmos, all of which was believed to be distanced, even separated, from God. The result was a great disenchantment—a supernatural or transcendent explanation was no longer necessary to explain the workings of the natural world.[21]

However, the great disembedding led to a new understanding of reality wherein human persons began to imagine a life disembedded from the social order, and the social order began to be seen as untethered from the cosmos, all of which was believed to be distanced, even separated, from God.

Concurrent with this great disembedding was the rise of providential Deism. Providential Deism effectively eclipsed the need for divine grace, faded divine mystery, and emptied divine providence.[22] The social dissolutions of these core Christian tenets led to a cultural setting where belief in God became easier to disregard and dismiss.

The understanding of the self as buffered instead of porous, the great disembedding, and the rise of providential Deism were all significant philosophical shifts that brought about the West's anthropocentric turn that led to fullness and flourishing being reduced to a this-worldly reality centered in economic mutual benefit.[23] Because of this, Taylor argues that Western culture has undergone the process of "immanentization," wherein people seek "meaning, significance, and 'fullness' within a closed, self-sufficient naturalistic universe without any reference to transcendence."[24]

An implication of an immanentized understanding of reality is that belief in the Triune God is no longer easy or axiomatic. While the sense in which the West has grown less religious in our secular age has been debated, it is clear that for many the objects of religious devotion and faith have migrated. Instead of finding salvation in a transcendent God who makes Himself known through His Son Jesus Christ, many now seek a sort of salvation in the acquisition and preservation of this-worldly things. To say that secularism caused consumerism is far too simplistic an assertion; however, as people look to fill the place of God in a secular age, consumerism is an obvious alternative. Therefore, as the social imaginary of the West has broadly come to accept the assumptions of the immanent frame with its eclipse of the transcendent; various social theorists, theologians, and economists have described how economics and consumerism have begun to function as a religion in our secular age with its own corresponding understanding of justification rooted in identity formation and social distinction.

One compelling description of this transition is from theologian Scott Gustafson's book *At the Altar of Wall Street: The Rituals, Myths, Theologies, Sacraments, and*

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Mission of the Religion Known as the Modern Global Economy. His central argument is that "economics functions in our current global culture as religions have functioned in other cultures."[25] Gustafson supports this thesis by demonstrating how modern global economics has pilgrimage sites like Walt Disney World and sacred places like shopping malls. It has prophets like Adam Smith and Karl Marx and core doctrines like "The Invisible Hand" and "The Efficient Market Theory." It can turn people into disciples by making them into consumers, and it even has the power to create new persons: the corporation.[26] Finally, it has a global mission to create more and more capital whenever and wherever possible.

Drawing on Luther's explanation of the First Commandment, Gustafson argues, "For many, the benefits we receive from The Economy truly are 'that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need.' This being so, the Economy is our God and Economics is a religion."[27] Whether or not one agrees with all of Gustafson's analysis, his work provides a plausible and persuasive account that describes how economics has come to function as a religion in our secular age.

Another scholar who has done substantial work to make the case that economics functions as a contemporary religion is non-Christian economist Robert Nelson. Contra many economists who see economics as more of a value-neutral science, Nelson argues, "Modern economics offers its own worldview, one that stands in sharp contrast to the Christian worldview."[28] In *Reaching for Heaven on Earth: The Theological Meaning of Economics*, Nelson, quoting economist Peter Boettke, contends that economics has become "the modern theology that . . . replaced traditional theology as the set of doctrines that give meaning to our social reality and hope to our endeavors of improving our lives."[29] In Nelson's analysis, the ascendency of the secular imagination did not result in the end of religion but the rise of a new religion of economic progress in which economists serve as the high priests.[30]

To illustrate the rise of the religion of economic progress, Nelson shows how economists like John Bates Clark (1847–1938) once referred to God shaping and guiding the economy toward "an increasingly just state of affairs leading, eventually, to God's kingdom." However, over time, Clark replaced the reference to God with categories like "natural law." Once the transition to natural law was made, the scientific quest to recover these laws began to take place, and reference to God became optional. These transitions helped establish an ersatz salvation story where the market's "invisible hand" was assumed to effectively replace God's all-powerful providential hand.[31]

Finally, a comprehensive and instructive description of consumerism as religion is given by theologian Jay McDaniel:

> As a religion, consumerism is even more powerful than scientism, and its influence holds sway in many circles that are antagonistic or indifferent to science. We might characterize the religion as follows. Its god is economic growth for its own sake; its priests are the public policy makers who provide access to growth; its evangelists are the advertisers who display the products of growth and try to convince us that we cannot be happy without them; and its church is the shopping mall. Its primary creeds are 'bigger is better' and

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> ‘more is better’ and ‘faster is better’ and ‘you can have it all.’ Its doctrine of creation is that the earth is real estate to be bought and sold in the marketplace. Its doctrine of human existence is that we are skin-encapsulated egos, cut off from the world by the boundaries of our skin. And the doctrine of salvation is that we are saved—or made whole—not by grace through faith as Christians claim or by wisdom through letting go as Buddhists claim, but by appearance, affluence, and marketable achievement.[32]

McDaniel helpfully describes how the religion of consumerism draws parasitically on core tenets of Christianity. In our secular age, the shell of the Christian story and surrounding doctrines have not necessarily been forgotten. Yet, the content, characters, problems, resolutions, and even the nature of justification have been re-narrated to arrive at a radically different religious account altogether.

Lutheran theologian Oswald Bayer argues that the need to justify oneself is a perennial human phenomenon known to all cultures and peoples after the fall into sin.[33] This need to justify oneself is also present in a consumer culture in the need to measure up or outdo others through the acquisition of material things.[34] This pattern was observed in 1899 by sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen, who famously coined the phrase “conspicuous consumption.”[35] Conspicuous consumption is often now called “keeping up with the Joneses.”

A dominant way people seek to justify themselves before others is through the single-family home. A home is a place of shelter, a place to raise families, and a place to experience leisure and recreation. But the home has also become essential for justifying oneself in a consumer culture. Few things signal personal success and engender social distinction like a new, large, well-kept, and beautiful home.[36] Besides the home, numerous consumer experiences and goods serve similar justifying functions, like vacations, cars, or the latest technological gadgets. Theologian Daniel Bell Jr. has aptly labeled this trend “justification by distinction.”[37]

Essential to note is that consumer culture is not driven merely by crass materialism or hedonism, but, as Bell writes, “This effort at justification by distinction is a matter of identity or recognition.”[38] In a consumer culture, the emphasis is less on possessing and hoarding “and more about the constant and endless acquisition of novelties for the sake of distinguishing oneself, for the sake of appearance, of being recognized as valuable in the eyes of the market, and hence, in the eyes of others.”[39] As theorist Guy Debord famously puts it, we live in “the society of the spectacle,” where identity creation and social distinction are two of the most significant commodities.

As we consider our Christian witness to neighbors in our secular age, we must keep in mind that we can only understand the all-encompassing formative power of consumer culture and consumerism if we see that what undergirds it is not merely greed or misplaced desire but an implicit, though comprehensive and coherent, religious account with its own corresponding understanding of justification, which can malform the understanding of some of the Christian faith’s central tenets, like the individual, the neighbor, God, and the Church.[40]

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Malformed Understandings: The Individual, Neighbor, God, and Church in a Consumer Culture

In a consumer culture, René Descartes' famous anthropological maxim, "I think, therefore I am," has been replaced with a new phrase: "I consume, therefore I am." This replacement comes with significant anthropological implications. *Homo consumens* is primarily an individual shaped by her own autonomous reason, desires, tastes, preferences, and values. While the consuming individual should not be thought to consume in isolation from neighbors or family members, the individual's desires, tastes, and values dominate consumptive decisions. Thus, *homo consumen*s is turned in on herself, focused on her own achievements and possessions, while ironically always in need of validation and justification from her neighbors and peers. Yet, no matter how much is consumed and acquired, the desire for more is often present.

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That individuals in a consumer society often seek worth and identity through money, possessions, and personal appearances has been described by theorist Guy Debord in his work, *The Society of the Spectacle*: "Just as early industrial capitalism moved the focus of existence from being to having, post-industrial culture has moved that focus from having to appearing."[41] Questions of ultimate truth ("being"), character, and moral virtue matter little for *homo consumens*. What does matter is how much the individual has ("having") and how these make that individual appear to others ("appearing"). Moreover, in a sexualized and social-media-driven culture, "appearing" refers to both the possession of consumer goods and the commodification of the body. The body and its appearance need constant physical maximization through restrictive dieting and fitness, Botox, and plastic surgery, as well as editing, airbrushing, and applying the perfect filter for the purpose of being seen as a commodity worth consuming.[42]

Consumer culture also influences one's understanding of the neighbor. In a consumer culture, relationships among neighbors can deteriorate into competition. As theologian Rodney Clapp argues, "neoliberalism sees people as individuals existing at the behest of the market, pitted in competition against one another."[43] Corporations compete to construct and produce the "next best thing," a pattern that also informs how neighbors understand and relate to one another. If someone acquires a new object of desire, neighbors often seek to measure up or outdo each other through the

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acquisition of an even newer and better object of desire. This phenomenon is called "competitive consumption."

Such an understanding of the neighbor negates the pursuit of "the common good" and the celebration of others' accomplishments and acquisitions without greed or envy. Additionally, vulnerability, social interdependency, and solidarity are not seen as virtues but as weaknesses to be exploited.[44] As Clapp points out, this logic is ingrained into consumers through reality television shows like *The Apprentice*, *The Bachelor*, *America's Next Top Model*, *Naked and Afraid*, and several others. These shows portray an all-out competition among neighbors, eventually leading to the ascendency of a winner. Viewers are taught to identify with the winner and to see the other neighbors as losers, even if there is a tinge of sympathy concerning their fate.

An even more problematic example of this phenomenon is pseudo-therapeutic television shows like *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Dr. Phil.* On these shows, viewers often watch lower income families and individuals divulge family secrets, affairs, and personal pains to the world, all so the viewer can look upon these people and gain a sense of self-validation at their expense: "Well, I'm not doing great, but thank God I'm not doing as bad as those people!"[45]

The competitive view of the neighbor often goes hand in hand with a utilitarian view of the neighbor. In a consumer-oriented culture, the neighbor is often viewed as a means to an end, rather than an end in herself. The neighbor's value is reduced to what she can do for me, rather than a wholistic appreciation for the neighbor as a creature of God with various gifts, talents, and responsibilities. This understanding of the neighbor can also have disastrous ramifications for building vulnerable relationships and cultivating social capital. Basing the neighbors' value on "what they can do for me" also undergirds how God is understood in a consumer culture.

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In a consumer culture, God is only considered valuable according to what He can do for the individual. In his book, *With: Reimagining the Way You Relate to God*, Christian pastor Skye Jethani describes several postures a person can take in her relationship with God. One dominant posture is "from" God. This posture, Jethani writes, "fueled by our consumer culture," conceives of a relationship in which God exists to supply what we desire.[46] He goes on to explain why this posture is so appealing today:

> The life from God posture is so appealing because it doesn't ask us to change. What we desire, what we seek, what we do, and how we live—all shaped by consumerism—are not disrupted. Our values and way of life are simply projected onto God and incorporated into a religious system in which

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> we receive divine assistance to meet our desires. In this way, life from God is nothing more than consumerism with a Jesus sticker slapped on the bumper.[47]

The formative power of consumerism to malform our understanding of God is significant. Sociologist Christian Smith has shown how this sort of consumeristic logic has helped create and inform a new de facto religion in North America, "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."[48]

The creed of this quasi-religion confesses a sort of God who wants people to be good and kind (moralistic), happy and safe (therapeutic), but is uninvolved in people's day-to-day life (deism).[49] The result is a God who is essentially like a "Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist."[50]

In this understanding, God does not demand anything traditionally associated with Christian discipleship, nor does He work salvation from sin, death, and the devil, but instead serves as the divine fulfiller of the consumer's greatest hopes and desires.[51] And as the Head goes, the body is soon to follow.

In a consumer culture, the church can be understood as another peddler of ideas and values in the marketplace. In his work, *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger describes why this understanding of religious institutions emerged. With the rise of religious and philosophical pluralism, religious institutions lost authority as the tacit belief system in society. Berger puts this way:

> Allegiance [to a religious institution] is voluntary and, thus, by definition, less than certain. As a result, the religious tradition, which previously could be authoritatively imposed, now has to be *marketed*. It must be "sold" to a clientele that is no longer constrained to "buy." The pluralistic situation is, above all, a *market situation*. In it, the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities. And at any rate, a good deal of religious activity in this situation comes to be dominated by the logic of religious economics.[52]

Berger's analysis in 1969 seems almost prophetic when considering all that has happened in the proceeding decades up to the present day. His insights foreshadow the work and assertions of those like George Barna, who writes, "Like it or not, the church is not only in a market but is itself a 'business.' It has a 'product' to sell—a relationship with Jesus and others. Its 'core product' is the message of salvation, and each local church is a franchise."[53] Berger's analysis also reveals the foundation for the ascendency of the church marketing and church shopping movements of the past few decades.

In other words, Christian churches in consumer cultures have become commodities to be consumed in the marketplace. As a result, the church has not only become "economized," but its purpose and function, according to societal thought, can be reduced to serving the desires, preferences, and tastes of the consuming individual.

David Platt describes this "me-oriented" understanding of the church in his New York Times bestseller, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream*:

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> Therefore, when I look for a church, I look for the music that best fits *me* and the programs that best cater to *me* and *my* family. When I make plans for *my* life and career, it is about what works best for *me* and *my* family. . . . This is the version of Christianity that largely prevails in our culture.[54]

If the purpose of the church is to fulfill a person's hopes and aspirations with a religious veneer, the preaching, teaching, worship, and parish activities must be seen as attractive and rarely, if ever, at odds with the broader cultural assumptions and values, including those of consumer culture. Preaching can become a reminder that God "takes you as you are and will give you what you desire," not an address that calls the hearer to turn from their sinful ways, repent, be forgiven, and by the Holy Spirit's power, strive to live according to God's design and desire for human creaturely life.[55] Moreover, in a consumer culture, the church's radical call to discipleship is also minimized as the church is reduced to a mere commodity that helps people fulfill their physical, material, and therapeutic desires.

In North American consumer culture, faithful understanding of the individual, the neighbor, and God can be malformed. However, when God's people are aware of these theological misunderstandings, they are better equipped to be on guard against them both communally and personally. They are also better positioned to offer a more beautiful, compelling, and faithful description of Christian doctrine in their witness to neighbors in our secular age. The following section seeks to sketch a more faithful description of these tenets by drawing on key themes from Lutheran theology, such as human creatureliness, justification by faith, the theology of the cross, and Luther's eucharistic ecclesiology.

Towards a More Faithful, Compelling, and Beautiful Description: The Individual, Neighbor, God, and the Church

In the beginning, the triune God, the Creator of heaven and earth, made man and woman in His image. What Christians understand and assume about the individual and the neighbor must be rooted in this central confession. Martin Luther offers this creaturely understanding of the individual in his explanation of the first article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism: "I believe in God the Father Almighty: What does this mean? I believe that God has made me and all creatures . . ." At the heart of a Christian understanding of the individual is, "I am a creature of God."

Lutheran theologian Charles Arand has argued that to be a creature is to recognize that the individual is contingent, dependent, and accountable to God.[56] As a creature, the individual does not have life in herself. The individual creature has been carefully knit together by God in her mother's womb (Ps 139:13–4) and continues to be preserved and protected by God as He gives and provides daily bread. The individual creature is also accountable to live according to the Creator's design and desire for human creaturely life.

However, the individual creature does not naturally seek to live according to the Creator's will. The individual creature does not want to be contingent or dependent on

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God but wants to be like God. This is most clearly seen when God's human creatures kill Jesus, the incarnate Creator of heaven and earth. Nevertheless, God raised Jesus from the dead. Following His resurrection, Jesus ascended to the Father's right hand as both God and a human creature and, in so doing, restored our creatureliness.[57] When a person is justified by faith in Jesus Christ through baptism, she is restored to the relationship God intended for His individual human creatures: living in faith toward God by receiving His gifts and trusting His promises, and living in love toward the neighbor through obedience and service.

Some might contend that being considered a creature is demeaning and insulting; however, being a creature of God is a far more meaningful way to live than the endless cycle of having and appearing in a consumer culture. Justified by faith, the individual is released from the burden of trying to be seen as "having enough" or appearing "beautiful enough." Because God has justified the sinner and calls her his own, she is made beautiful by his love and given a treasure that moths and rust cannot destroy.

Justified by faith, the individual is released from the burden of trying to be seen as "having enough" or appearing "beautiful enough." Because God has justified the sinner and calls her his own, she is made beautiful by his love and given a treasure that moths and rust cannot destroy.

This creaturely understanding of the individual also has significant implications for relationships with neighbors, and provides a far more beautiful and compelling understanding of the neighbor than can be found in consumer culture. In a consumer culture, the relationship with neighbors can often center on competition over social status and distinction. However, for a person to find her identity as a creature of God is to recognize that she lives among other creatures and is dependent upon them, responsible for them, and called to rejoice and lament with them.

Lutheran theology confesses that God works *through* His creatures *for* His creatures. This means that creatures are dependent on one another. For instance, when Christians pray that God would grant daily bread, God answers this prayer. But God does not answer it by dropping food out of the sky. God answers this prayer by working *through* farmers, truckers, warehouse employees, and grocery store workers to give daily bread *to* His creatures *for* their well-being. This example is a microcosm of how God works through His creatures and how His creatures must work on behalf of one another for the mutual flourishing of creaturely life on earth. Instead of constant competition, a creaturely understanding of neighbors reveals a divine economy of mutual dependency and responsibility arranged by God for the well-ordering and functioning of life within His creation.

A creaturely understanding of the neighbor also means that neighbors are responsible for one another (Gal 6:2). As God's justified people strive to live in accord with God's will for His creation, they are called to protect and defend one another's life and well-being, and also to protect and defend the life of their spouse and family, property, assets, and reputation. As a result, relationships among neighbors are not

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detached; rather, they are responsible and full of Christ-like sacrificial service for the well-being of the neighbor (Phil 2:1–11).

Finally, a creaturely understanding of the neighbor frees neighbors from the burden of competitive consumption. Having been freed from "keeping up with the Joneses" by being justified by faith in Jesus Christ, neighbors are free to rejoice with those who are doing well and lament and pray with those who are struggling (Rom 12:15). Thus, creaturely life is not characterized by winners and losers but by solidarity and charity among mutually dependent and responsible neighbors, who, by the Holy Spirit's power, come to practice contentment, generosity, and mercy as they have been justified by faith in the triune God.

The identity and purpose of God in a consumer culture bear strikingly little resemblance to the identity and purpose of the triune God revealed in the Holy Scriptures. In a consumer culture, God can quickly be understood as a cosmic vending machine that satisfies personal desires and needs. However, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus is not a cosmic butler or therapist whose sole purpose is to bring about the desiring individual's happiness, but the Almighty God who created all things out of nothing by His Word, and who gives Himself freely as a gift through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ.

One of Luther's key distinctions comes from his Heidelberg Disputation (1518), where he distinguishes between a theologian of glory and a theologian of the cross. A theologian of glory wants glory for herself. She wants success, acclaim, victory, power, and a God who can actualize these hopes and desires. The understanding of God as a divine butler and therapist in a consumer culture is the God of a theologian of glory. However, Lutheran theologian Robert Kolb helpfully describes Luther's concerns with such an understanding of God and why it should also concern us:

> Luther found these theologies of glory inadequate and insufficient, ineffective, and impotent. For such a theology of glory reaches out for a manipulable God, a God who provides support for a human creature who seeks to master life on his or her own, with just a touch of divine help. That matched neither Luther's understanding of God nor his perception of his own humanity. Theologians of glory create a god in their own image and a picture of the human creature after their own longings. Neither corresponds to reality, Luther claimed.[58]

The God of consumer culture cannot deal with pains and suffering of creaturely life under the bondage of sin. The God of consumer culture is of no help when bankruptcy comes, the house is foreclosed, or the business falters. But a theologian of the cross recognizes that God is known and found in a radically unexpected way: in and through suffering and the cross. At first, this understanding of God appears weak and foolish; however, the theology of the cross faithfully describes how God is strong to save and why God is a present help in times of trouble, and here is where we arrive at a far more beautiful and compelling understanding of God than can be found in the understanding of God in consumer culture.

In Jesus Christ, we come to know the God who offers forgiveness from guilt, honor in a culture of shame, and peace amid a world of anxiety. Moreover, this same

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God shares the pains and sufferings of His human creatures and bears them in His love. By His incarnation, death, and resurrection, Jesus has done something about evil, sin, and suffering forever. On the cross, Jesus atoned for the whole world's sins, but He also took the world's sins, evil, pain, and suffering into Himself (Is 53:3–5). Jesus "has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" and is with His people in their pain and suffering on this side of the resurrection through the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments in the church to forgive, strengthen, and form His people.[59]

In a consumer culture, the church is understood to be another commodity to consume in the marketplace that helps people fulfill their material and therapeutic needs. This understanding of the church is "me-centered" and ignores what God is doing in and through the church through His Word. As a result, the understanding of the church in a consumer culture loses its distinctive identity and purpose, both of which are established and enacted by God Himself.

The church is not a business or commodity to be consumed but a creature of the Word (*creatura Verbi*) and the place of God's gracious presence and activity—a place where He speaks to His creatures.[60] God is present everywhere but knowing where Christ is present *pro nobis* and *pro me* is essential. Luther writes that God "has set down for us a definite way to show us how and where to find him, namely the Word."[61] "Because," Luther explains, "it is one thing if God is present, and another if he is present for you. He is there for you when he adds his Word and binds himself, saying, 'Here you are to find me.'"[62] In the church, where the Word is rightly preached and the Sacraments are rightly administered, Christ is present for the blessing and benefit of His people.

Unlike the consumeristic understanding of the church's message, the true message of the church is not one of mere therapeutic affirmation but the address of God that kills, makes alive, and brings forth a new way of life in the Holy Spirit. In the church, the Holy Spirit works through the written Word of God and the spoken Word of the preacher to effect repentance and faith when and where He wills. Through the preaching of the law, we creatures are convicted of our sinful rebellion against God's design and desires for us, and, by the Spirit's power, we come to agree with God's judgment upon us.[63]

Yet through the preaching of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit creates faith, which grabs hold of the promise of forgiveness and a new identity in Jesus Christ. Through the proclamation of the Word in the church, God provides nothing less than a death and resurrection in the creature. As the creature is forgiven and made new by the powerful Word of Jesus in the waters of baptism, she is brought into the body of Christ, the communion of saints, the one, holy, Christian church.

In a consumer culture, the church might be perceived as "me-centered," rooted in what the church can do for the individual. However, a more faithful understanding of the church is communal, participatory, and "neighbor-oriented." Lutheran theologian David S. Yeago describes how justification by faith is not individualistic; rather, it means being brought into the community of the church:

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> Justification by faith is not, for Luther, the establishment of a private individual relationship to God, which may subsequently find expression in adherence to the church. Justification is incorporation into the communal priesthood of the church, into the unity of the Body of Christ with its head . . . sharing in the hidden mystery of the church's union with Christ takes place in, with, and through participation in the church's common life and its holy practices.[64]

Justified by faith, the human creature is made a member of the Body of Christ, connected to Jesus the Head. Luther clearly articulates the creature's connection to the Head and other members of the Body of Christ in his treatise on the Lord's Supper, "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and Christ, and the Brotherhoods (1519)."[65]

"All the saints," Luther writes, "are members of Christ and of the church, which is a spiritual and eternal city of God."[66] To be a member of this eternal city is to share the community's spiritual possessions, which "become the common property of him who receives this sacrament."[67] This includes especially sharing one another's sufferings and blessings: "In this sacrament," Luther writes, "[the believer] is thus united with Christ and his saints and has all things in common . . . Christ's sufferings and life are his own, together with the lives and sufferings of all the saints."[68] As a result, the suffering of one citizen in this eternal city is suffering to all, and the blessing to one is a blessing to all.

In this treatise, Luther's eucharistic ecclesiology helps us grasp a more beautiful and compelling description of the Church than how those in a consumer culture often perceive the Church. The "me-centered" understanding of the Church, which exists to fulfill one's physical, material, and therapeutic desires, gives way to a "neighbor-oriented" understanding of the Church rooted in solidarity, fellowship, and mutual service through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Christians' understanding, practice, and descriptions of certain aspects of their faith are inevitably molded by the various cultures and societies in which they live, work, worship, and witness. This paper has explored how a particular aspect of the North American social imaginary—consumer culture and consumerism—shapes and forms the lives and witness of God's people.

In our secular age, consumerism functions as a religion with its own corresponding understanding of justification, which can malform how people understand certain central Christian tenets, like the individual, the neighbor, God, and the Church. Drawing on various themes and insights from Lutheran theology, this paper has offered more faithful ways for God's people to describe and speak about the individual, the neighbor, God, and the Church. By learning how these central Christian tenets can be malformed in a consumer culture, God's people are better equipped to be on guard against them personally and communally, and they are in a better position

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to offer a more beautiful, compelling, and faithful description of them in their witness to neighbors.

Endnotes

[1] Not all Christians desire this distinctiveness from the surrounding culture(s). For instance, H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* describes a five-fold typology to conceptually explore how various sorts of Christians have tried to relate to culture. It is also true that some circumstances should invite individual Christian or parishes to be distinct from the cultures in which they live, whereas at other times these same Christians might learn something from the cultures in which they are embedded. For a discussion of the various ways the Church can engage culture, see Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 20–42, 93–110.
[2] Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 16–18. Bretherton refers to "ecclesial-turn" theologians like John Milbank, William T. Cavanaugh, and Oliver O'Donovan as representatives of this tradition. For important critiques of this tradition, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 93–119 and Nicholas M. Healy "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5, no. 3 (November 2003): 287–308, https://doi.org/10.1111/1463-1652.00110.
[3] Practical theologian Joyce Ann Mercer gives a helpful working definition of consumer culture and consumerism in *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005), 73. Mercer, quoted in Terri M. Elton, writes, "'Consumerism' refers to a way of life structured by and around various practices of consumption and accumulation. In a consumerist society, consumption dominates social practices, such that relationships, activities, space, work, and leisure come to be structured around various practices related to consumption. Consumption becomes a way to achieve social solidarity—relational connections with others, even as it also marks identity and status." "The Story We Find Ourselves In: Nurturing Christian Identity in a Consumer Culture," *Word and World* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 168–177, 171. However, I would argue that the practices and logic of consumerism and consumption do not primarily bring "social solidarity," but "social competition."
[4] While this essay explores how these problems take particular shape in a North American consumer culture, they are not unique to it. These same problems materialize and emerge in less consumer-oriented societies, as well.
[5] For helpful summaries on the relationship between neoliberalism and Christian theology, see Kevin Hargaden, *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age: Confronting the Christian Problem with Wealth* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018) and Rodney Clapp, *Naming Neoliberalism: Exposing the Spirit of Our Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021).
[6] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015), 50.
[7] This does not mean that ideas, political parties, or institutions do not shape the assumptions of the societies in which they are present, but a neoliberal understanding often contends that the market economy shapes the logic of these other entities.
[8] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 50.
[9] John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 39.

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[10] William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 34.
[11] Cavanaugh, 35.
[12] Cavanaugh, 47.
[13] Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion*: *Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), 87.
[14] Robert Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1979), 72.
[15] Mike Snyder, "$9.12 Billion Spent in a Day: New Black Friday Online Spending Record Set in 2022, Report Says," *USA TODAY*, November 26, 2022, https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/shopping/2022/11/26/black-friday-2022-online-sales-record/10780279002/.
[16] "Social imaginary" is a term drawn from the work of Charles Taylor that describes how people imagine the world functions. It refers to the beliefs, practices, expectations, and assumptions that members of society share that shape their day-to-day life and that provides the logic or rules for how they act and think. It is often implicitly present in people's lives rather than explicit and pre-conscious rather than conscious. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) and *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 23–24.
[17]For a helpful summary and discussion of *A Secular Age*, see James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014).
[18] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.
[19] Taylor, 38–39.
[20] Taylor, 152.
[21] Taylor, 446.
[22] Taylor, 222–223.
[23] Taylor, 177.
[24] Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 141.
[25] Scott W. Gustafson, *At the Altar of Wall Street: The Rituals, Myths, Theologies, Sacraments, and Mission of the Religion Known as the Modern Global Economy* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 9.
[26] For a treatment of corporations as people, see Gustafson, *At the Altar of Wall Street*, 89–107. The idea of corporate personhood is not new in contemporary economics. However, it has received significant attention since the 2010 Supreme Court's ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. Corporate personhood does not refer to those people who work for corporations but describes how corporations are now treated as legal persons, though not human persons, with certain legal rights as described in the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution.
[27] Gustafson, 9.
[28] Robert H. Nelson, "The Theology of Economics," in *Faithful Economics: The Moral Worlds of a Neutral Science* eds., James W. Henderson and John Pisciotta (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005): 89–108. For a critique of economics as a neutral science, see William T. Cavanaugh, "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Departments of Economics" in *Field Hospital: The Church's Engagement with a Wounded World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), 55–73.
[29] Robert H. Nelson, *Reaching for Heaven on Earth: The Theological Meaning of Economics* (Savage: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), 342.

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[30] Robert H. Nelson, *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014). See also, Nelson, *Reaching for Heaven on Earth*, xxi–ii, where he writes, "The history of the modern age reveals a widely held belief that economic progress will solve not only practical but also spiritual problems of mankind."
[31] Nelson, *Economics as Religion*, 102.
[32] Jay McDaniel, "Spirituality and Sustainability," *Conservation Biology* 16, no. 6 (2002): 1462–63.
[33] Oswald Bayer, *Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 1–8.
[34] David Zahl, *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, And Romance Became Our New Religion and What to Do about It* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), xi–1. Zahl explores how the concept of "enoughness" and the yearning to be seen as "beautiful enough," "rich enough," or "hard-working enough" are all examples of the continued need to justify oneself in the eyes of others in a secular age.
[35] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008), 48–49, 55.
[36] For a discussion of the importance of the single-family home in a consumer culture, see Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 47–70 and Albert Y. Hsu, *The Suburban Christian: Finding Spiritual Vitality in the Land of Plenty* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2006), 32–40.
[37] Daniel M. Bell Jr, *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 118.
[38] Bell, *The Economy of Desire*, 119–120
[39] Bell, 120.
[40] Again, the longing to be justified through various philosophies of life or religions is not unique to North America or a consumer culture. It is a fundamental human problem that is present in many other contexts and cultures.
[41] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone, 1994).
[42] The body as a commodity also has a more sinister side, as can be observed through the illegal sex and organ trade; see Stephen Wilkinson, *Bodies for Sale: Ethics and Exploitation in the Human Body Trade* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
[43] Clapp, *Naming Neoliberalism*, 33.
[44] Clapp, 52.
[45] Clapp, 53.
[46] Skye Jethani, *With: Reimagining the Way You Relate to God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 65.
[47] Jethani, *With*, 65.
[48] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162.
[49] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162.
[50] Smith and Denton, 165.
[51] Smith and Denton, 163–164
[52] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967; repr. New York: Anchor, 1969), 138. Emphasis in original.
[53] George Barna, *Marketing the Church: What They Never Told You About Church Growth* (Colorado Springs: Navpress Publishing Group, 1988), 13.

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[54] David J. Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2010), 70.
[55] John W. Wright, *Telling God's Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2007). Wright distinguishes between "therapeutic" and "tragic" preaching to describe how contemporary preaching can quickly become a mere therapeutic affirmation instead of an address of God that reforms the hearer's world to be in conformity to God's will.
[56] Charles P. Arand, "Back to the Beginning: Creation Shapes the Whole Story," *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 132–147, 134–135.
[57] Arand, "Back to the Beginning," 135.
[58] Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Theology of the Cross," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 443–446, 448.
[59] See Gene Edward Veith Jr. and A. Trevor Sutton, *Authentic Christianity: How Lutheran Theology Speaks to a Postmodern World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 118–121.
[60] Concerning the Church as born by the Word of God, see "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520," LW 36:107.
[61] "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ against the Fanatics, 1526," LW 36:342.
[62] "That These Words . . . 'This is my body,' 1527," LW 37:68.
[63] Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, trans. John M. Jensen (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001), 5–8.
[64] David S. Yeago, "'A Christian Holy People': Martin Luther on Salvation and the Church," *Modern Theology* 13, no. 1 (January 1997): 101–120, 116.
[65] "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body, and the Brotherhoods, 1519," LW 35:52. See also Michael L. Laffin's discussion of this text in *The Promise of Martin Luther's Political Theology: Freeing Luther From the Modern Political Narrative* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 79–86.
[66] LW 35:51.
[67] LW 35:51.
[68] LW 35:52.

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How *Not* to Become God: What *Watchmen* Can Teach Christians about Living in a Godless World

Benjamin Leeper

Introduction

"WHO WATCHES THE WATCHMEN?"—the slogan is emblazoned in graffiti that contrasts the burnt orange sky, iris orchid skyline, and long shadows of a city that seems to be in constant twilight (Figure 1). Nearby, a man with bright orange hair carries a sign that reads, "THE END IS NIGH." In Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' graphic novel *Watchman*, this sidewalk prophet is treated as an amusing oddity—a reminder of a bygone era when the end was not so imminent that its significance could be addressed seriously. The world of *Watchman* has a history like our own, except for two seemingly minor points of divergence. In 1938, an unknown man wearing a black hood and a rope tied in a noose around his neck violently attacked a gang of men assaulting a young man and a woman. Then in 1959, a man named Jon Osterman forgot his girlfriend's watch in an intrinsic field experiment test chamber. These two events rippled out into the world, bringing forth an age of vigilante crime fighters, a vastly different

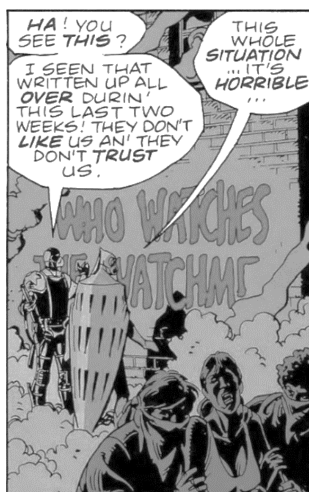

Fig. 1. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, Watchmen, New Edition (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2014), 2:18.

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Vietnam war, and an American society that is more nihilistic, more chaotic, and less hopeful than the one we inhabit. Yet what makes Moore and Gibbons' masterpiece *Watchmen* so compelling is how it portrays a group of rudderless "heroes" navigating a hyper-realistic world not too dissimilar to our own. *Watchmen* presents an almost prophetic alternate history, one that disrupted the graphic novel medium in ways still felt today. While its infamous tagline, "Who Watches the Watchmen?" may have referred originally to the governmental oversight of masked crime fighters, it also represents a larger theological point of the work. The implicit answer to the question is clear: no one watches the watchmen. No God looks down from above, approving or disapproving of our actions, except the gods we make. And if we make the gods, then who will watch over them? Who will protect us from them? Who will protect us from ourselves? These questions are part of the *gestalt* of the world of *Watchmen*. Every person who inhabits this world is shaped and formed by these questions, even if she never asks them explicitly. Indeed, there is no need to ask. Everyone already knows the answer.

The empirical and existential experience of this world as both lacking God and yet retaining unfairness, incoherence, purposeless, and suffering, creates the conditions by which God is almost entirely implausible.[1] The theological name for this experience is *Deus absconditus,* or *the God who is hidden*. Whether He is hidden from the sight of man or truly absent, the imminent reality is the same: God is not here.[2] This cultural moment seems particularly characterized by a society-wide experience of the apparent absence of God, which raises questions about the effect this will have on our culture and how Christians can respond to an apparently godless world.

Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen* provides the perfect playground to explore these questions, because it puts three of its central characters—Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, and Veidt—through varied experiences of the absence of God, allowing the reader to examine the effects. A character analysis of these three individuals from *Watchmen* reveals that experiences of God's absence—or more provocatively, of God's death—necessarily cause them to undergo a process of self-deification, in which they become solely responsible for providing meaning and morality for themselves and for their world, thus filling the role normally attributed to God.

The reexamined philosophies of Fredrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus provide the framework for this analysis, raising legitimate questions to which a Lutheran theology of the cross, as explained by Deitrich Bonhoeffer, responds. This has great implications for the Church and her mission, as it provides a way for Christians to engage honestly with a culture that seems to want nothing to do with God by offering a strange yet essential lesson: how *not* to become God.

A Philosophical Prolegomenon

Understanding the philosophical underpinning that informs much of the world of *Watchmen*—and of our own—is essential. At a certain point, philosophy ceases to be an object of theoretical study and instead drifts into a matter of cultural analysis as it

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enters the public imagination. This is precisely what has happened with nihilism and existential philosophy. The process of self-deification that Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, and Veidt undergo is laid out plainly in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science.* The infamous madman remarks, "God is dead and he remains dead! And we have killed him!"[3] As has been long recognized, the death of God is not the killing of an actual deity, but rather the release of absolute values and objectivity that come from an assumed faith in an all-powerful God, which in the West refers specifically to the God of the Bible. Decades would elapse before others would truly understand the nihilistic lack of coherence that accompanies the disillusionment of the hypothesis of God.

Notably, this experience is not confined to those who identify as atheists, although Nietzsche was certainly addressing that crowd. It also includes Christians and other theists who, while professing to believe, live and think as if God does not exist. Thus, the death of God may not include the death of religion or religious rites at all. As Philip Rieff predicted in 1967, "people will continue to genuflect and read the Bible, which has long achieved the status of great literature; but no prophet will denounce the rich attire or stop the dancing. There will be more theatre, not less, and no Puritan will denounce the stage or draw its curtains."[4] Religious man remains after the death of God. The primary difference is who the "god" is. When an individual experiences this "death," Nietzsche argues that he then *must* become god himself: "How then shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murders? . . . is not the magnitude of this deed too great for us? Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it?"[5] Those who kill God must now take on the responsibility of creating meaning, morality, and value themselves. This self-deification is not ontological but rather *vocational*.[6] It pertains not to one's essence, but rather to one's role in the world.

The existentialist tradition of the twentieth century generally agrees with Nietzsche's imperative for deification, although existentialists differ in their assessment of the positivity of this development. Jean-Paul Sartre made a "sweeping, exceptionless claim that the fundamental project of *all* humans is to strive to become in-itself-for-itself, or God."[7] But for Sartre, this desire was also in bad faith—a self-deception rooted in humanity's inability to actually become what they set out to be. Martin Heidegger did not speak in terms of deification, but his concept of the *Dasein* contains the responsibility of humans for meaning making, which amounts to divinity in the vocational sense. Albert Camus provides the clearest explanation—and criticism—of existential self-deification. Speaking of Dostoevsky's character Kirilov from *The Possessed*, he writes, "To become god is merely to be free on this earth, not to serve an immortal being. Above all, of course, it is drawing all the inferences from that painful independence. If God exists, all depends on him and we can do nothing against his will. If he does not exist, everything depends on us. For Kirilov, as for Nietzsche, to kill God is to become god oneself."[8] The independence of becoming god is painful—even crushing. It certainly kills Kirilov. Camus devotes major portions of *The Myth of Sisyphus* to the question of suicide precisely because self-deification is so dangerous for mere mortals.

Even though other existentialists like Sartre ultimately criticize self-deification, they often try to maintain and embrace the meaning-making role of humanity, necessarily promoting humanity to the role of gods. Camus attacks this attitude by

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establishing the true weight of the absurd. Speaking of existentialists who acknowledge the absurd but promote escapism, Camus writes, “they deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them.”[9] For Camus, the absurd is the crushing tension between the human heart’s desire for meaning and God’s (or the world’s) apparent disinterest in providing an answer. But between the two of them, Camus is clear that the problem lies with the former, not the latter. As he asserts, “The worm is in man’s heart. That is where it must be sought.”[10] It is not existence that is absurd, for by what standard can that be judged but by man? No, absurdity is a *personal* existential experience. Camus finds a strange comrade in Martin Luther, who agreed four hundred years prior in his commentary on Ecclesiastes. In a statement that was radical at the time, he wrote,

> What is being condemned in this book, therefore, is not the [creation] but the depraved affection and desire of us men, who are not content with the [creation] of God that we have and with their use but are always anxious and concerned to accumulate riches, honor, glory, and fame, as though we were going to live here forever: and meanwhile we become bored with the things that are present and continually yearn for other things, and then still others.[11]

Luther’s point is that the issue is not with God’s creation—everything under the sun—which he upholds as good, but with man’s heart. Vanity, or absurdity, is a label that can belong only to mankind.[12]

Despite his reluctance with the attitude other existentialist philosophers have toward the absurd, Camus ultimately embraces absurdity not because the absurd provides the answer, but rather because its acknowledgment allows honesty, which he hopes can counter suicide and the meaninglessness of death. Sisyphus, ever futilely and powerlessly pushing his rock up a hill, only for it to fall back down, becomes Camus’s absurd hero by his ability to find joy through his embrace of that which is fated and that which he fates. Sisyphus is the perfect architype for a society that finds itself caught between meaninglessness and the need to create one’s own meaning. Many are willing to “imagine Sisyphus happy,” but they have missed that for Camus absurdity is always a crushing tension—we *must* imagine Sisyphus happy, for we have no other choice.[13] The popularity of the “death of God” philosophy in the present is matched only by an ignorance of the true and necessary effects of the absurd. In this respect, *Watchmen* becomes an invaluable resource by imagining three absurd heroes and the consequences of their self-deification.

Three Case Studies from *Watchmen*

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While *Watchmen* can be read as a critique of the God of the Bible, as some scholars do, *Watchmen* is more focused on critiquing man-become god.[14] Chapter 3, "Judge of all the Earth," is a reference to Genesis 18:25, in which Abraham pleads with God for mercy upon Sodom and Gomorrah. In his intercession to God, Abraham says "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous far as the wicked, far be it from you." This intercession is necessary within the Scriptural narrative because it is not immediately clear that God himself is bound to the same moral code as Abraham. Yet this reference serves to critique Dr. Manhattan, not God (Figure 2). Dr. Manhattan occupies the role of the "judge of all the earth," because world peace is quite literally balanced on his big blue shoulders. But he ignores this responsibility and flees to Mars. Moore and Gibbons' point is that Dr. Manhattan is the indifferent "watchmaker" god. The accusation sticks because the God of the Bible is already perceived to be deistically absent. The "theology" of *Watchmen* is more anthropological than theological. The critical focus is thus more appropriately aimed at three characters: Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, and Veidt. An almost religious awe accompanies these characters as they experience a compulsory self-deification, taking on the role the Christian God once served in individual and societal life in the West. Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, and Veidt follow to a T this process of self-deification laid out by Nietzsche and Camus, allowing the reader to join them on their journey to godhood and beyond. Each provides a window into the diverse ways in which God's absence can be felt, as well as the type of gods one becomes as a result.

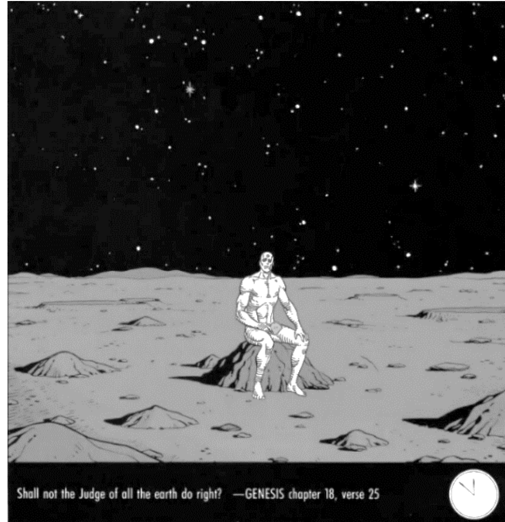

Fig. 2. Moore and Gibbons, Watchmen, 3:28

Rorschach

Dr. Manhattan so clearly functions as a fill-in for God in *Watchmen* that he has blinded critics analyzing how other characters interact with divinity. Terry Ray Clark, author of "The 'Comic and Tragic Vision' of Apocalyptic Rhetoric in Kingdom Come and *Watchmen*" remarked that "If nothing else, [Dr. Manhattan] is the closest thing to God in the graphic novel. No other truly god-like figure makes an appearance."[15] But Clark is mistaken. God-like figures abound in *Watchmen*: they are just not all quasi-omnipotent blue beings. While *Watchmen* is a world where God is dead, it is not a world lacking gods. One such "god" is Rorschach, also known as Walter Joseph Kovacs. The aspect of godhood that Rorschach assumes is primarily that of arbitrator

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of morality. This is because Rorschach experiences God's absence as *injustice*. His survey of the world has revealed a host of wicked people who, instead of receiving punishment, flourish. For Rorschach, this truth is unacceptable, and it clearly causes him a great deal of angst because he believes that a coherent world requires retributive justice. The lack of coherence and the presence of injustice has killed God for Rorschach. As he says to his psychotherapist:

> Looked at sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there. The cold, suffocating dark goes on forever, and we are alone. Live our lives, lacking anything better to do. Devise reason later. Born from oblivion; bear children, hellbound as ourselves; go into oblivion. There is nothing else. Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose. This rudderless world is not steered by vague, metaphysical forces. It is not God who kills the children. Not fate that butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It's us. Only us.[16]

The incoherence of existence—a lack of patterns, randomness of events, ambiguity origin and purpose—leads to a lack of meaning, except that which is self-made. God's absence is inferred from this, which in turn places humanity in the hot seat. Rorschach is brutal and merciless, often beating other people indiscriminately, exacting a collective punishment upon humanity that Rorschach brings down to the personal level. His lack of restraint demonstrates that he believes that all of humanity is responsible for this injustice, and thus all of humanity deserves his punishment and wrath.

Kathryn Imray remarks that, "whereas classically, God judges through the prophet and punishes through external agents, without God, Rorschach appoints himself to both roles. Without God, anything is permissible, including Rorschach's monstrous, black-and-white, neo-fascist retributive justice."[17] It is not only that Rorschach's actions are permissible. For him, they are required. He says so himself: "We do not do this thing [vigilantism] because it is permitted. We do it because we have to. We do it because we are compelled."[18] If the point were not clear enough, this quote is framed with a shot of the phrase, "WHO WATCHES THE WATCHMEN," to drive home the point that the absence of God is the force that compels Rorschach. Without God to enact justice, whether in the present or in a hoped-for future, Rorschach *must* take on divine retributive justice himself. This is Rorschach's self-deification, derived directly from the death of God. Rorschach does not see himself as part of humanity, but as something beyond and above it. This is clear from the very first page of the book. Rorschach opens the novel with "the accumulated filth and all their sex and murder will foam up about their waists and all the whores and politicians will look up and shout 'save us!' . . . and I'll look down and whisper 'no.'"[19] Rorschach positions himself in the place of God, enacting his own version of divine wrath upon the world.

Yet Rorschach's deification could by no means be called a success. Rorschach fails to reckon with his own participation in the system of justice. He is not actually

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capable of ascending beyond humanity, and his psych report makes it clear that his politically far-right view of justice stems from the childhood trauma associated with his father's abandonment. He lacks objectivity, he lacks mercy, and he lacks the ability to discern right from wrong in situations of moral ambiguity. When he discovers Veidt's plot, he insists on telling the world, even though this will bring about considerable suffering, potentially cause World War III, and make meaningless the death of three million people. Rorschach shows no understanding of the morally gray, instead finding his will completely bound to a pre-determined binary that exists only in the abstract, even when it causes more harm. Rorschach has no choice in the matter, because "there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise in this."[20] Rorschach's vocational role as god ultimately leads to his death at the hands of Dr. Manhattan, without having punished or prevented any of the great evils he identified.

Dr. Manhattan

Dr. Manhattan is the clearest god-like figure in the entire novel. Unlike the other characters for whom deification is only vocational, Jon Osterman, as he was known before he became Dr. Manhattan, experiences an ontological change that places him closer to godhood. He is repeatedly called a god by those around him, and many of Gibbons' illustrations, such as Dr. Manhattan walking on water or creating matter, are reminiscent of biblical imagery. As one of his colleagues once remarked, "God exists and he's an American"[21] Yet it is not Dr. Manhattan's ontological deification that matters most, but his vocational one. Despite Dr. Manhattan's power, he has not transcended the true ontological barrier of Godhood maintained by Christian theologians. He is still a creature, made by a creator. That line cannot be crossed, and even if he does have the ability to create *ex nihilo,* he was not the one who created this universe, and so is not properly "God"—only god-like. His god-likeness is achieved ultimately not by an intrinsic field generator, but by the experience of the death of God, just like Rorschach.

Unlike Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan does not experience the death of God as injustice, but as *meaninglessness.* Human injustice is barely a concern to him, as it matters little whether red ants or black ants are crushed under his boot. As he says to Laurie, "Don't you see the futility of asking me to save a world that I no longer have any stake in?"[22] He struggles to see life and death as meaningful, remarking that a dead body and an alive one have the same number of atoms. Yet he seems to want to be convinced of humanity's meaningfulness. His entire conversation with Laurie in Chapter 9 is an effort to allow her to convince him of that very fact. While seemingly she does succeed, it can only be called a half-success.

Dr. Manhattan does return, too late to stop Veidt. Having learned that humanity is meaningful because they are thermodynamic miracles, he nevertheless expresses no interest in continuing to help them at the end of the novel but decides to go out and try to create his own human life. He is not able to find meaning: he must create it. He must be god. Of course, Manhattan denies this. "I don't think there is a God, Janey. If there is, I'm not him."[23] But his denial of his own godhood does not change the facts. As

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Alan Moore stated in an interview, "To have the concept of 'god' you have to be a human being in that when you are a god, the word 'god' vanishes."[24] This is likely why so few others notice the deification that has happened to them. As one moves from the role of human creature to meaning creator, the word "god" loses its meaning.

Dr. Manhattan becomes a god because he experiences the world as meaningless. As he says in his conversation with Laurie on Mars, "I was asking the point of all that struggling; the purpose of this endless labor; accomplishing nothing, leaving people empty and disillusioned. Leaving people broken."[25] His words are very similar to the laments of Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes, which the Jewish Jon Osterman may have read: "Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (Eccl 2:11). The burden of endless and meaningless labor is a constant theme in Ecclesiastes and is one of the telltale signs of a vain and absurd world. Qoheleth laments how others ultimately benefit from one's labor, and that envy drives one further and further into toil for no one's sake. Yet Dr. Manhattan is unable to embrace the only suggestion Qoheleth offers to those experiencing meaninglessness: live in the present. Man is not to envy the future or to pine after the past, but "eat and drink and find enjoyment in all his toil" (Eccl 3:13). This is not a hedonistic approach to life, which Qoheleth tried to no avail in Chapter 2 of Ecclesiastes, but rather one which sees the present as a present from God: "This is God's gift to man" (Eccl 3:13).

Manhattan lacks the faith to embrace toil as both meaningless and gift, and thus resolves the tension the only way he is able to. Dr. Manhattan's superpowers seem to prevent him from accepting this gift, as he is almost always focused on any moment but the current one. His experience of all personal time simultaneously is exactly what tears apart his romantic relationships, what prevents him from processing his own emotions, and what robs him of free will, because he must stay on a course set by someone else. As Dr. Manhattan himself says, "We're all puppets, Laurie. I'm just a puppet who can see the strings."[26] Dr. Manhattan deconstructs Camus's Sisyphus by revealing his fatal flaw: he is no longer bound by destiny, but he is still a victim of fate. Becoming god-like—of both the vocational and ontological varieties—has not brought freedom, but only ever more meaninglessness.

Here Moore and Gibbons illustrate one of Nietzsche's lesser-known points in his book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche's concept of the death of God and its relation to the "Übermensch," or superman, are well-known. Some even aspire to be an Übermensch, seeing this as the positive fulfillment of the self-deification that is necessary after experiencing of the death of God. The concept is an appealing one. Zarathustra is Nietzsche's prophet, announcing this new goal for humanity to ascend, displacing nihilism with the self-made values, enforced by the will to power.

> Thus Zarathustra's parable, like Nietzsche's parable of the madman, teaches that the only worthy response to the death of God and the collapse of traditional morality is to seize the powers that were previously thought to be the special prerogative of God. But whereas Nietzsche's madman does not go beyond declaring the

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> imperative to self-deification, his Zarathustra actually seeks to provide an account of the discipline by which one may become God.[27]

The Übermensch is by no means a dictator, but a benevolent gift to humanity that enables humans to live with concrete values and certainty, even if God is dead. There is just one problem: Nietzsche does not think it is possible to actually become a true Übermensch. Peter Berkowitz documented this limit in Nietzsche's work, arguing that "A contest between a peculiar combination of convictions compels Nietzsche to identify self-deification as a human being's supreme perfection. A close study of a range of Nietzsche's books, however, indicates that for human beings such perfection is not attainable."[28]

By part 2 of the book, Zarathustra is no longer liberated by the death of God but crushed by it. As Berkowitz restates, "owing to the huge gap, everywhere apparent, between what men are and what the ethics of self-deification requires them to become, life among men is for Zarathustra a living Hell, a waking nightmare."[29] Zarathustra discovers that it is *not humanly possible* to become an Übermensch—to experience true deification. For the task to be done without complete disaster requires perfection and power unknown to humankind. But what if one were not human? What if one possessed god-like powers and perspective? Could one then experience self-deification? Moore and Gibbons answer this question in the negative through the character Dr. Manhattan.

Dr. Manhattan never even tries to become an Übermensch because he is cut off at the knees almost immediately. Dr. Manhattan never thinks that he is God because he experiences powerlessness in the midst of almost limitless power. Godhood is empty for him. He ponders, "A world grows up around me. Am I shaping it, or do its predetermined contours guide my hand?"[30] He lacks determination and free will, and thus morality and meaning ultimately escape him. This demonstrates that power is not enough to overcome Zarathustra's goal of self-deification. Even if one had god-like abilities, he would still be a creature, never able to cross the necessary line to become true God.

Veidt

Veidt experiences this process in a markedly different way than the other two. He portrays none of the telltale signs of experiencing the death of God which leads to self-deification. This is because Veidt arrives at the same destination by an inverse route. He experiences first the desire to be like God, which leads to an experience of the death of God. From an early age, Veidt's hubris put him in a category all his own. He monologues, "My intellect set me apart. Faced with difficult choices, I knew nobody whose advice might prove useful. Nobody living."[31] He does not experience meaningless or injustice, but rather a kind of self-centered boredom. He ultimately finds crimefighting hollow because he knows himself to be capable of so much more. He believes that he could be humanity's savior,[32] associating himself with one of Egypt's greatest pharaohs, Ozymandias, who like many pharaohs was viewed as

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divine by his people. The death of God comes not with a bang, but with a whimper, as Veidt's view of himself never made much room for God in the first place.

This reverse process is known to Nietzsche. He even explains exactly how it could happen through Zarathustra:

> "But let me reveal my heart to you entirely, my friends: *if* there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god! *Hence* there are no gods." . . . note the structure of Zarathustra's argument: Whereas Nietzsche's madman argued from the death of God to the imperative to become God, Zarathustra argues from his own desire to become a god to the death or nonexistence of God and gods. Drawn by conclusions and lured by drives, Zarathustra is compelled by his own tyrannical need for absolute mastery to utter his rejection of God and gods.[33]

J. Keeping argues that Veidt "most closely resembles Nietzsche's Übermensch" out of all of Moore and Gibbons' characters.[34] It does not matter that Veidt does not expressly confess the death of God because he does enact a tyrannical attempt to become an Übermensch.[35] This is clear from language he uses in the "Veidt Method," a self-betterment program he is selling to the masses:

> "If followed correctly, [these exercises] can turn YOU into a superhuman, fully in charge of your own destiny. All that is required is the desire for perfection and the will to achieve it. . . . When you yourself are strong and healthy in mind and body, you will want to react in a healthy and positive way to the world around you, changing it for the better if you are able, and improving the lot of both yourself and your fellow man."[36]

As the interviewer of NOVA EXPRESS magazine says concerning Veidt, "I have to g-ddamned[37] admit that he looks like a g-ddamned god!"[38]

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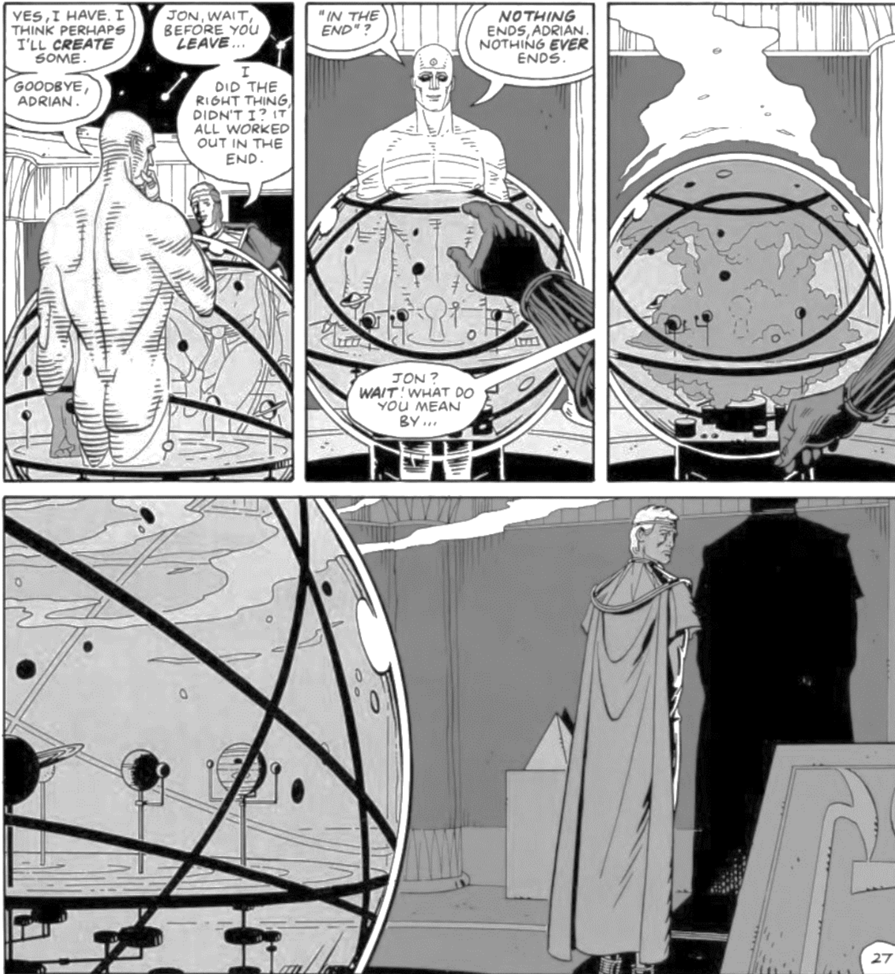

Fig. 3. Moore and Gibbons, Watchmen, 12:27

Veidt is an almost perfect Übermensch, possessing the power (wealth and intellect), the will, and even the benevolence required for the role. But this must be reckoned in accordance with the end of the novel, when Veidt drops a psychic squid on New York City, killing three million people. He is a utilitarian, arguing that this action is required for the greater good because it prevents nuclear Armageddon. His actions may seem ironic for the modern reader, who knows that the Cold War ended without either nuclear holocaust or psychic squids. Were Veidt's actions even necessary? The whole reason that Russian and USA tensions are high by the end of the novel is because Dr. Manhattan has removed himself from the situation—or rather, Veidt has removed Dr. Manhattan. Veidt, having become a superman, commits mass genocide, seemingly to appease his own ego. Even if one accepts his benevolent motives at face value, Veidt is not redeemed.

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Veidt embodies Nietzsche's famous phrase: "Whatever is done out of love takes place beyond good and evil."[39] Veidt is beyond good and evil—and not in a good way—because he believes that he acts out of "love" of the world.[40] Moore and Gibbons make this point rather clearly through the "The Tale of the Black Freighter," an in-universe comic book that reflects both the attitude of the times as well as acts as a vicarious mouthpiece for Veidt in the later chapters. In *Watchmen* 11:9, the main character shouts, "How had I reached this appalling position, with love, only love, as my guide?" When confronted with the immorality of his actions, and called to acknowledge the evil he has wrought, Veidt replies simply, "Confession implies penitence. I merely regret [the Comedian's] accidental involvement."[41]

Veidt's actions are not moral, but he does put everyone else in moral checkmate by appealing to the issue of meaning in a meaningless world. The reason that his plan cannot be exposed by those who become aware of it after the fact is that it will make those three million deaths meaningless, while his killing of them has given them meaning by allowing them to participate in the prevention of World War III. This moral checkmate is possible only in a world without God, as only in this world are their deaths rendered meaningless without Veidt's "higher plan." This is why his reasoning works so well on Dr. Manhattan, who is almost immediately pacified. If God were not dead, their lives could be assumed to have meaning regardless of whether an egomaniac uses them as part of a homicidal plot to save the world. But since he is dead for all those present, the checkmate holds.[42] As Nite Owl II says, "How can humans make decisions like this? We're damned if we stay quiet, Earth's damned if we don't."[43]

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Veidt succeeds at the self-deification project where the others failed. Yet even his success is ultimately a failure. In Chapter 12, Dr. Manhattan pays a visit to Veidt, who

Fig. 4. Moore and Gibbons, Watchmen, 2:9

is meditating in his room. Veidt seems morally disturbed—a marked change from his almost absolute confidence earlier. He makes a passing comment about a dream in which he is swimming toward a ship, clearly a reference to the ship of the damned, the Black Freighter. For the first time in his recorded history, he turns not to himself for moral justification, but to someone else: Dr. Manhattan. He asks cautiously, "I did the right thing, didn't I?" Then, in a more characteristic moment, he answers his own question: "it all worked out in the end."[44] Dr. Manhattan offers his chilling and now infamous reply: "In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends."[45] Some have taken this to be a cosmological statement, similar to others Dr. Manhattan made in previous chapters. That may very well be Dr. Manhattan's intention. But Veidt's distressed reply and unsettled face (Figure 3) show that is not how he hears Dr. Manhattan's words. In one tiny sentence, Dr. Manhattan has crushed Veidt's self-deification and his attempt at justification. Veidt was motivated throughout the work by consequentialist ethics, believing that the ends justify the means, as long as the ends are glorious enough to outweigh the suffering. In fact, it is his envisioned utopian society that he believes gives meaning to all those deaths. But Manhattan points out that there is no end.

There is no "all working out" because there is never a point where humans have the objectivity required to look back upon the totality of an action and judge its morality. Everything is still unfolding. Perhaps WWIII will still happen, despite Veidt's efforts. Perhaps his intricately laid out plan will be undone by an inflexible racist conspiracy theorist, who just happened to submit his journal to a far-right newspaper before his death, which just so happened to fall into the hands of an intern

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with nothing better to print.[46] More importantly, the fact that nothing ends means that Veidt can *never be justified.* Dr. Manhattan's response is an ethical one, in which he undoes Veidt's ability to appeal to a *telos* by removing the very ability to consider a *telos* at all. Without God, Veidt has no objective standard nor end, and thus must lie in the bed he has made, forced to admit that his own self-righteous actions can never be called anything but meaningless**.** Veidt is brought back to earth, and Job 14:1–2, which was previously quoted over his face, sums up his situation well (Figure 4). [47] Veidt's godhood is limited by his humanity, even as his humanity is undermined by his godhood.

Living as a Christian in the World of *Watchmen*

The idea of a Christian living in the world of *Watchmen* is almost laughable. The few Christians who do exist within the universe are not treated with any seriousness. Every character seems doomed to experience the death of God at some point, with the result that one's faith will be pushed out to make room for self-deification. In a world in which God's absence is commonly felt, the Christian has three options. One popular route is to deny the reality of the abyss, proclaiming that the coherence of existence is readily apparent. The problem with this view is that it tends to make creation itself a kind of God, as it is creation that provides stability and security, with God merely propping it up through will or essence. God is a God of power, but not much else. This view is also unlikely to be persuasive to those who have experienced God's absence through suffering, meaninglessness, or the illusion of self-importance.

Another option is to withdraw from the world, essentially abandoning it to burn while saving oneself. Here, the absurdity of existence is acknowledged, but unaddressed beyond one's conclave. Such people might as well admit their implicit nihilism disguised as faithfulness and join those who try to imagine Sisyphus happy.

However, another option may be found by following in the footsteps of the great German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Often just as misunderstood as the existentialists, Bonhoeffer is unique in that he used the Lutheran tradition as a means of addressing and ministering to a world in which God appeared absent, as was certainly the case during the reign of the Nazis during World War II. Bonhoeffer demonstrates that not only is it possible for Christians to live in a world in which God's absence or hiddenness is painfully clear, but it is even imaginable for them to thrive and witness to Christ in such a world if they root themselves in His cross.

While Bonhoeffer was a theologian who was adept at reading his time, he also believed that a proper cultural diagnosis required turning to the scriptural narrative, especially the origin account. The reason that humankind has lost their story is because they have "lost the beginning. Now it finds itself in the middle, knowing neither the end nor the beginning, and yet knowing that it is in the middle."[48] The modern struggle for meaning and morality in the middle goes all the way back to this lost beginning, which Bonhoeffer carefully unpacks.

In dialogue with Nietzsche's work, especially *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* Bonhoeffer casts the fall in Genesis 3 as an event in which man becomes god. The

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promise of the serpent is that Adam and Eve would become *sicut deus*—like God. In a twist fit for a Greek tragedy, Bonhoeffer argues that they receive exactly what was promised:

> Humankind is now *sicut deus*. It now lives out of its own resources, creates its own life, is its own creator; it no longer needs the Creator, it has itself become creator, insomuch as it creates its own life. Thereby its creatureliness is eliminated, destroyed. Adam is no longer a creature. Adam has torn himself away from his creatureliness. Adam is *sicut deus*, and this "is" is meant with complete seriousness—not that Adam feels this, but that Adam is this.[49]

At the moment of the fall, Adam is transformed from a human creature, limited and in perfect relationship to his creator, into a being who *must* now create for himself. Adam stole the vocation of God, and by doing so, set humanity on the path we are on today.

Just as this self-deification was deadly and disastrous to Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, and Veidt, so it is for Adam and for all of us. Adam creates the absurd—the worm in the heart of man. Following Luther, Bonhoeffer places the fault of skepticism upon humanity, not on God. For Luther, "The conclusion that life has no meaning or that nothing can be known reflects badly neither on the Creator nor on his creation as though it were inadequate. Rather it identifies one part of creation, mankind, as having exceeded its capacity."[50] By exceeding the capacity of creatureliness, humanity began to bring about the Nietzschean death of God. By encroaching on God's role in the world, Adam began the process of pushing God out of it.

Lutherans have long had another word to describe this kind of self-deification: idolatry. In his explanation of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism, Luther writes, "Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God."[51] While the most common idol in the Bible is Mammon—money and property—the most deadly and ultimate idol is the self. The Christian views idolatry as a self-deception—lying to ourselves about who God is and who we are. When Luther describes this greatest idolatry in his Large Catechism, he writes, "What is this but to have made God into an idol—indeed, an 'apple-god'[52]—and to have set ourselves up as God?"[53] The struggle of scripture is God against gods, as God tries to save humanity. The original sin is the desire to be *sicut deus,* and the First Commandment given on Mount Sinai reflects this. When humans set themselves up as gods, they deny both God's place and their own place in the world. The disaster that follows is vocational, as God's role is wrested from Him and put on shoulders unable to bear the load. This is a consistent theme in *Watchmen*, and the overlap in the narrative with the Christian idea of idolatry is remarkable.

If the problem is idolatry of the self, then the solution to this issue is found in its opposite: the theology of the cross.[54] Drawing from Luther's *theologica crucis* [the theology of the cross] defended at Heidelberg in 1518, Bonhoeffer centers his theology on God's revelation through the suffering and death of His Son. What this means is

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that if God is to be known, it will not be by trying to find coherence in the world, or by looking inward, but only to Christ crucified. Elsewhere, God is mysteriously hidden, as he operates in ways beyond human understanding or knowledge. But the Christian finds God uncovered in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In His Son, Jesus, God reveals himself in a way that can actually be known by humanity. Here, God is imminent, limited according to the human nature of Christ, empirically knowable, and revealed. God chooses to address His own absence in a remarkable way: by becoming one of us. Through this, God undoes the cycle of self-deification by being God-become-man, for the sake of us men-become-gods. In Christ, humanity finds its restoration, as Christ is both fully God and as fully human as God intended humanity to be.

Tom Gregg summarizes this in a pithy manner, writing, "For Bonhoeffer, salvation is by *anthroposis* not theosis."[55] Christ's work is not about making humans divine, but about making humans fully human. Christ's incarnation and atonement on the Cross do not elevate humanity to divinity, but instead allow humans to discover a renewed humanity in Christ. It is Christ's work of redemption that reorients the system from God against gods to God for humanity, giving humanity a new *telos* and saving them from their greatest idol.

While in Prison at Tegel near the end of his life, Bonhoeffer wrote, "The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and suffering of God; only the suffering God can help. To this extent, one may say the death of God frees us to see the God of Bible who gains ground and power in the world by being powerless."[56] This may seem a strange statement, especially considering the consequences of the death of God. But Bonhoeffer made a profound discovery: when our God is the God whose Son died on the cross, we become immune to the deifying effects of the "death of God." This is because the God who "died" is not the true God, the God of the Bible, revealed in His Son, Jesus Christ who suffered and died on the cross. No, the implausible god whose death Nietzsche's madman proclaimed is the *deus ex machina*: the god of power, the metaphysical god, the god who answers all our questions, removes all tensions, and frees us from the absurdity of existence. To worship this god is to be a theologian of glory—an idolater.

According to the Heidelberg Disputation, "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who perceives the invisible things of God as understandable on the basis of those things which have been made [Rom. 1:20]."[57] True, God is all-powerful, acting in the world through providence to accomplish all that humanity attributes to itself. But Bonhoeffer correctly flees from the hidden God of power and "calls a thing what it actually is," the central defining characteristic of a theologian of the cross. [58] Honesty before God and before the world is paramount to Luther and Bonhoeffer. The theologian of the cross must acknowledge the experience of the absurd in the same breath in which he acknowledges God.

According to Bonhoeffer,

> we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world—'*etsi deus non daretur*' [As if God were not given/did not exist]. And this is

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> precisely what we do recognize—before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. Thus, our coming of age leads us to a truer recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as those who manage their lives without God.[59]

Bonhoeffer believed the world's historical development into a godless world was the work of God himself, as the death of the god of power makes room for the true God—the suffering God. It was God who was pushing himself out of the world. It was God who had created a world that appears to function without direct reference to Himself. We therefore live in the world "'before God' yet 'without God.'"[60] Bonhoeffer views our *etsi deus non daretur* situation as a blessing from God—and it certainly can be.

Bonhoeffer is optimistic that the death of God clears the slate for the weak God to encounter the world in all its power. He writes, "God consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us."[61] Only the weak and powerless God can help, because only in Him do we find ourselves vicariously represented by His actions. By abandoning omnipotence and the other attributes of God as a starting point, God works a power that is capable of claiming our entire lives—our entire world even—all without denying the reality of the "godless world." The need for theodicy fades away not because the Christian denies God's power and omnipotence but because he recognizes that God is both *hidden* and *revealed*. But God can be known in the world only through the means in which He has revealed Himself, and any attempt of my humanity to pull back God's veil is futile and unfaithful. Thus Christ alone, the God-made-man, is the Christian's anchor in the "godless world."

The Christian lives in the world of *Watchmen* by fleeing the hidden God who is absent and clinging to God revealed in Christ. Through Him, they reclaim their humanity. This allows the Christian to *experience the absence of God without becoming compelled to become God*. The Christian can experience injustice and call it what it is. The Christian can experience meaninglessness and stare into the void without this causing the death of their God. Christians are able to remain human through these experiences by understanding that God is God and they are not, and that while God appears to be absent, He is ever-present in Christ through His Word, Sacraments, and the Church. The theologian of the cross lives in tension, capable of feeling the absence of God honestly while remaining a person of faith.

How might this type of faith have impacted the three self-deified *Watchmen* characters? Perhaps Rorschach would not have felt the need to right injustice himself. Dr. Manhattan may have been able to hold onto his humanity and find meaning in that humanity and in the humanity of others. Veidt would have never tried to be the world's savior and could have applied his resources and intellect toward the common good without committing mass murder. The weak and suffering God is not impotent at all; he is truly capable of saving humanity from themselves.

Theologians of the cross are people who can stare into the void, facing the absurdity of existence—in life and death—without flinching. They do not raid heaven, neither condemning nor defending their God, but trusting and fearing Him. They cling

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always to the cross, finding God in His promises and in the places He reveals himself to them. They hope for the next world but live in this one, enjoying the gift of the present. They acknowledge the pain and suffering of the world without needing to carry it themselves. This honest faith is a much-needed antidote to the compulsion so many feel to take on the role of God themselves.

Conclusion

The world of *Watchmen* is very similar to our own. Our society is almost as godless as the one Moore and Gibbons envisioned. Millions of people experience the absence of God through injustice, meaninglessness, and suffering; and for many, this experience leads to the death of God. But this is not the only way. The Lutheran theology of the cross provides a way that acknowledges this existential experience without leading to tragic self-deification. Christ offers us our own lost humanity, allowing us to take our place before God in a world seemingly without God. He gifts us with the present, allowing us to enjoy food, drink, and work without the responsibility to become our own gods.

Watchmen is a classical tragedy, portraying the pitfalls of all who walk the path of self-deification. Neither power, intellect, nor self-made morals will allow one to traverse the road to self-godhood unscathed. Even success often spells disaster for others. *Watchmen* provides a compelling narrative within which the theories of the existentialists are tried, tested, and found wanting. Moore and Gibbons do not offer Christianity as an alternative in the least, but they help clear the field for the God who reveals Himself in weakness to work.

Christians who desire to effectively inhabit the type of world *Watchmen* portrays would do well to embody the honesty of the theology of the cross, acknowledging existential and theological realities, even when they are in tension. By living in this manner, Christians can offer another way of living honestly and faithfully in the world in light of the hiddenness of God. This is the key to faithful witness in a seemingly godless world. For those in search of meaning, those for whom the "god of power" has died, the Christian Church can point them toward the true God who is found not in power, but in weakness among the rubble. What the Church has to offer the world right now is the strange lesson she must always relearn: how *not* to become God.

Endnotes

[1] This language recalls discussion of plausibility structures in Charles Taylor's infamous work, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018).
[2] Sartre observes as much in *Being and Nothingness.* He prefers the term "absence" of God to "non-existence" of God in that the former can be known through experience, while the latter is functionally unknowable.
[3] H. J. Blackham, *Reality, Man and Existence: Essential Works of Existentialism* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 66.

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[4] Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1966), 26.
[5] Blackham, *Reality, Man and Existence,* 66.
[6] By this term, I mean that it concerns the role, office, and function of godhood. Being a god is not a proper human calling in Christianity, nor would it be appropriate to call God's role as God a vocation, as vocations are given by God. Nevertheless, the term captures the idea of the *munus dei et hominis*.
[7] David Detmer, *Sartre Explained: From Bad Faith to Authenticity* (Chicago: Open Court, 2009), 134.
[8] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), 79–80.
[9] Camus, 24.
[10] Camus, 4.
[11] Martin Luther, *Notes on Ecclesiastes, Lectures on the Song of Solomon, Treatise on the Last Words of David*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Hilton C. Oswald, vol. 15, Luther's Works (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing, 1972), 8.
[12] In the Lutheran tradition, the issue is not merely consciousness. The experience of vanity is not a result of humanity's solitary ability to think abstractly. Rather, it is because of the disharmony of humanity, caused by the fall (Gen 3), which disrupts humanity's relationship with God, the world, their fellow humans, and even their own humanity itself (Formula of Concord, Article I). Even Existentialists like Sartre admit that the issue is not humanity's ability to ponder the meaning of the universe, but rather with her insatiable desire for an answer.
[13] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 91.
[14] Kathryn Imray, "Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do Right? Theodicies in *Watchmen*," *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 29, no. 2 (July 2017): 119–31. Imray's extraordinary essay tracks the ways in which these three characters offer and deconstruct theodicies, or defenses of God. Rorschach proposes an anthropocentric view of evil, Dr. Manhattan portrays the consequences of a deistic "watchmaker" God, and Veidt demonstrates that suffering can have a higher utilitarian purpose. While Imray is correct that all three attempts result in tragedy, atrocity, and disaster, she missed the fact that *Watchmen* assumes God's absence and injustice *a priori*.
[15] Clark, quoted in Imray, "Shall Not the Judge."
[16] Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*, New Edition (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2014). 6:26. All citations are given in Chapter:Page so as to be consist between editions. All editions contain the same page numbers directly drawn onto a panel on the page.
[17] Imray, "Shall Not the Judge," 125.
[18] Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 6:15.
[19] Moore and Gibbons, 1:1.
[20] Moore and Gibbons, 1:24.
[21] Moore and Gibbons, 4:2.
[22] Moore and Gibbons, 9:8.
[23] Moore and Gibbons, 4:11.
[24] Alan Moore, "Alan Moore Interview, 1988," interview by Vincent Eno and El Csawza, *{feuilleton}*, February 20, 2006, https://www.johncoulthart.com/feuilleton/2006/02/20/alan-moore-interview-1988/?msclkid=6405f22fcf4311ec940cb54dbe66e4c0. Originally published in *Strange Things Are Happening* 1, no. 2 (May/June 1988).
[25] Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 9:17.
[26] Moore and Gibbons, 9:5.

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[27] Peter Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 157.
[28] Berkowitz, 19.
[29] Berkowitz, 191.
[30] Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 4:27.
[31] Moore and Gibbons, 11:8.
[32] When he is at the Comedian's funeral, Moore and Gibbons zoom in on Veidt's face while the priest says the line "O lord most mighty O holy and most merciful savior, deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death" (*Watchmen*, 2:12). This foreshadows both Veidt's savior complex and the death he will deliver unto three million people.
[33] Berkowitz, *Nietzsche*, 184.
[34] J. Keeping, "Superheroes and Supermen: Finding Nietzche's *Übermensch* in Watchmen," in *Watchmen and Philosophy: A Rorschach Test*, ed. Mark D. White, Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009), 58.
[35] While he does not confess it directly, Veidt's journey is connected to the protagonist of "Tales from the Black Freighter" on *Watchmen* 12:27, and that character certainly does express it.
[36] Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, Chapter 10.
[37] I have retained the use of the Lord's name in vain because it is truly used in vain. Laurie also frequently abuses the name of God and Jesus, and this language only further drives home that in the world of *Watchmen*, the name of God is vain—empty, absurd, meaningless.
[38] Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen,* 8.
[39] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 70.
[40] Moore and Gibbons make this point rather clearly through the "The Tale of the Black Freighter." In *Watchmen* 11:9, he shouts, "How had I reached this appalling position, with love, only love, as my guide?"
[41] Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 11:24.
[42]This is not to say that a Christian could not conceivably stay quiet in this situation, weighing that the harm caused by enacting justice would cause more injustice (as the Just War Tradition holds). But that is not fundamentally the argument at play here. Rorschach's retributive justice is no more Christian than those who concede to Veidt. Rorschach's justice is no justice at all—merely an attempt at coherence through the punishing of the wicked. His binary morality is completely self-centered.
[43] Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 12:20.
[44] Moore and Gibbons, 12:27.
[45] Moore and Gibbons, 12:27.
[46] *Watchmen's* final panel is a shot of Rorschach's journal being picked up, threating to undo everything Veidt has done.
[47] The first two panels are the KJV quotation of Job 14:1–2. The last panel is from the *Book of Common Prayer*, in the Order for the Burial of the Dead, which is used in the Anglican Church.
[48] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, ed. John W. De Gruchy and Douglas S. Bax, vol. 3, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 28.
[49] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 107.
[50] Robert Rosin, *Reformers, the Preacher, and Skepticism: Luther, Brenz, Melanchthon, and Ecclesiastes* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1997), 148.

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[51] Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 386.
[52] Likely meaning "sham God"
[53] Kolb, Wengert, and Arand, *The Book of Concord*, 389.
[54] Michael A. Lockwood has persuasively argued that for most of Luther's career he suggested that the opposite of a theologian of the cross is not a theologian of glory, but an idolater. Indeed, the two are one and the same, but it seems that Luther much preferred the use of idolatry over glory after Heidelberg, likely because of its clarity. See *The Unholy Trinity: Martin Luther against the Idol of Me, Myself, and I* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2016), 240.
[55] Tom Greggs, "Bearing Sin in the Church: Ecclesial Hamartiology of Bonhoeffer," in *Christ, Church and World: New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Theology and Ethics*, ed. Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler (London; New York; Oxford; New Delhi; Sydney: T&T Clark, 2018), 87. Emphasis in original. Theosis is a key component to Eastern Orthodoxy and is a common theme in ancient church fathers like Athanasius of Alexandria. Theosis is not about ontological or vocational deification but is usually spoken of in terms of praxis, or the action of God (i.e., becoming Christ-like in one's life and behavior). Theosis should not be completely discounted as a metaphor for God's work with humanity, but it should never be divorced from anthroposis, which should always be the primary *telos* of humanity in Christ. A further discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this essay.
[56] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best et al., vol. 8, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2010), 479.
[57] Dennis Bielfeldt, "Heidelberg Disputation," in *The Roots of Reform*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, Kirsi I. Stjerna, and Timothy J. Wengert, vol. 1, The Annotated Luther (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 83.
[58] Bielfeldt, 83.
[59] Bielfeldt, 478.
[60] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 25.
[61] Bonhoeffer, 25.

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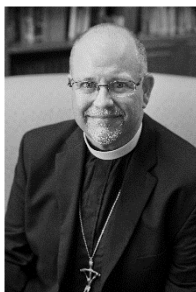
"Lights . . . Cameras . . . Faith?!" Christian Interaction with the Culture as It is Shared in Cinema

Jeffrey E. Skopak

In the beginning . . .

We do not recognize this date with a holiday or remember it with great fanfare. In fact, the very industry that was born on this date hardly gives it notice. On June 19, 1905, in the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the culture was forever changed and challenged with the grand opening of The Nickelodeon—America's first public movie theater. Moving pictures marched into society for the price of a nickel a seat—a bargain for this new technology when you consider a nickel in 1905 was equivalent to $1.75 today. Like most cultural shifts, cinemas and movies took a little while to catch on with the public. Pictures that move—who would have ever thought?! Yet, the intrigue and curiosity of the public needed to be fed and grown.

By 1915, movies had become an "industry," growing from short films (ten to thirty minutes long) to feature films (120 minutes or more). Then something powerful happened: a movie broke through the veil of curiosity and into mainstream society. It wasn't a science fiction flick or a super-hero extravaganza. Rather, it was a movie set against the backdrop of "recent" American history. The movie? *The Birth of a Nation.* Originally called *The Clansman,* this 1915 movie, directed by D.W. Griffith, was controversial even before it found its way to the theaters. The film chronicles the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln and then follows the relationship of two families from the Civil War and the days after during the Reconstruction.



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The Birth of a Nation is generally considered one of the most racist films ever made. African Americans were played by white actors in blackface and are portrayed as intellectually inferior and as predators of white women. Meanwhile, the Ku Klux Klan is depicted as a force standing for American values, the protection of white women, and all things patriotic. It is said that this movie had the societal impact of revitalizing the Klan in America. Important to remember is that the film was produced in 1915 America—a country only fifty years removed from the Civil War. Reconstruction and the identity of "one nation" was still an ideal but not a reality.

At a staggering cost of $100,000 (roughly $3,026,000 today) the movie made an estimated $100 million ($3.26 billion today). How culturally relevant was *The Birth of a Nation*? In 1992, the Library of Congress deemed the film culturally, historically, and esthetically significant and selected it for preservation in the National Film Registry. In other words, regardless of how the public reacted to the film's message, there is no denying that the movie had a major impact on American culture.

Before I go any further, I must clarify what I mean by "culture." Culture is the characteristics and expanding knowledge of a people. The United States Constitution begins, "*we* the people." Culture is the "we" and the "people" are the many individuals that make up the society. Culture encompasses the language (including words and phrases), food, social habits and norms, music, art, sports, entertainment, *movies,* and just about everything and anything else you can think of. Culture is the "we" in which the "people" live. And culture is expressed, pushed, prodded, challenged, and expanded by what is played out in motion pictures.

Other forms of entertainment also have a profound impact on culture. Just consider music and sports with their exponential growth in both popularity and gross income over the last century. Artists like Taylor Swift and Justin Bieber easily sell out venues in a few short hours, and tickets to events like the Super Bowl and the World Series can cost thousands of dollars for a single seat. But movies are unique because they incorporate all types of entertainment into one medium—music, dance, sports, and art to name a few. And let's not forget that cinema liberally and generously uses the backdrop of contemporary issues and history while exploring the role and impact of influential people in society. All of this comes to life on a big screen, complete with comfortable chairs and popcorn.

A Reflection on the Screen

Although it may sound ridiculous, most, if not all, movies reflect the society in which we live. Wrapped in a variety of packages, such as superheroes, space adventures, love stories, and comedic romps, there is a line running through movies that calls the audience to see the world through the eyes of another person—whether that be the writer, the director, or the actors playing their respective roles. Some movies affirm our beliefs and convictions, while others challenge, appall, or even horrify us. A single movie can broaden our worldview by exposing us to different cultures and languages or provide us the comfort we needed as we see a character endure hardships that reflect our own experiences.

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Once we get beyond the genre of a particular film, the real stories of living in society can be found—life and death, pain and suffering, joy and blessings, healing and wholeness, peace and happiness. A simple animated movie can address the challenging life issue of losing one’s spouse, while a movie about wizards and witches can open our hearts to the hardships of adoption and personal belonging. Meanwhile, a superhero can test our understanding of justice, while a slapstick comedy can make us laugh about the dysfunctions of a blended family. All this to say—movies reflect and reiterate the shared values of society and thus help to shape culture.

But therein lies the Christian conundrum: How do we navigate our way through a culture that seems all too often at odds with Christian faith? How do we, in good conscience, engage with cinema if so much of it seems antithetical to the Christian message? Much of the tension Christians face is due to a few verses found in Jesus’s High Priestly Prayer in John’s gospel. Jesus says,

> I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. (John 17:15–18)

Culture and its grand amplifier, cinema, are “of the world.” And Jesus starts this portion of the prayer by reminding us that His faithful followers are “*not* of the world.” If Jesus concluded the prayer with these words, it would be safe to say that Christians should build the walls higher, tighten up the defenses, never step foot into a movie theater, and by no means subscribe to any streaming services!

But Jesus continues, *“*As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world*”* (John 17:18). As Christ was sent into the world by the Father, now Jesus declares that He has sent the disciples into the same world. And, by virtue of our faith in Jesus, we too are being sent into the world. If God’s work is to be done, it will be done by God’s people amid the cultural maelstrom known as “today.” Like the disciples, we are sent to engage and live in society. Which brings me back to the cultural amplifier, cinema.

The Cultural Amplifier

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Movies are everywhere. In the past, if you did not catch a certain movie in theaters you had to wait for what seemed like an eternity for the movie to find its way onto network television. To function in a television format, the film had to be modified and space had to be created for advertisements. And, because it took so long to make it to television, some of the movie's cultural relevance may have been diluted or lost altogether over the period of months (and in most cases years) before arriving in your living room.

But such delays are no longer an issue. Today, we are barraged by movies; they are *everywhere.* They are still in theaters, of course, but are now released quickly and nimbly to streaming services that we can access on our phones, tablets, or computers. Moreover, massive flat screen monitors and sound bars are now affordable for most people, which means we can bring the cinematic experience into our homes. The cultural amplifier no longer costs a ticket to the theater; no, the cultural amplifier known as cinema can now be engaged in the comfort of our living rooms—or anywhere we take our smart phones. What does that mean? No matter how tall you build your walls against this incredible tool of culture, and no matter how secure you think you have locked the gates, movies are swirling all around you.

No matter how tall you build your walls against this incredible tool of culture, and no matter how secure you think you have locked the gates, movies are swirling all around you.

As the variety of cinematic experiences populate the screens at our disposal, we need to be cognizant of the fact that these movies have something to say—whether we want to experience them or not. These movies feature narratives, predicaments, and characters that we see in everyday life and are filled with the prevailing attitudes and beliefs that are integral to society. The characters are relatable and address struggles and challenges that we face in our culture. More often than not, movies that amplify cultural realities rocket in ticket sales and reach the rarified air of "blockbuster."

Look no further than the blockbuster movie *Barbie* that was released on July 21, 2023. With a budget of $145 million, who would have ever thought a movie based on a popular girl's toy would have such a cultural impact? As of the writing of this paper, *Barbie* has topped $1.3 billion in global ticket sales—that's *billion* with a "b"—making it the biggest ever box office success in the genre of comedy. But *Barbie* is more than a comedy. It dares to dabble in feminism, women's rights, and the challenges of womanhood in twenty-first century America. And let's not leave out themes like purpose, happiness, and contentment that are woven into the movie.

Bouncing between Barbie Land and real-world California, the film is about much more than toys coming to life and living in society. Viewers are prodded to consider existential questions. During a climactic moment when Barbie Land is in abject chaos, it is Gloria, the "real-world" mother of a teenage daughter who puts it all into perspective. Marie Le Conte, in an article for *New Humanist*, sums up Gloria's soliloquy thusly:

> It is impossible to be a woman . . . the female experience in a patriarchal society is so full of contradictions that no woman can go through it without

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> going mad. We must be assertive without being bossy; we must have money but never ask for it; we must look good but not so good that we draw too much attention to ourselves; we must run things without telling anyone what to do, and so on. In Kenland, as in any other society ruled by men, women can never win.[1]

Why are these words culturally important? Because people living in our culture resonate with them. It's not a question of whether you agree or disagree with what Gloria says—this is what she feels, and she is having an existential crisis right in front of our eyes. But don't forget about the husbands and fathers who are watching this movie! *Barbie* dares to broaden the cultural net and reach for more. In the film, the Kens turn to "patriarchy" as the means to run Barbie Land, but it fails miserably. As Le Conte puts it,

> Stripped of their power, the Kens begin lashing out then eventually demure. Running stuff is hard, it turns out! That's what Gosling's Ken tearfully tells Barbie. Because she is not in love with him, she tells him to find out who he is if he is not defined by his relationship with her. In the end, it feels worth noting that few people—or dolls—are truly happy, eschewing what would or should have been the conclusion of a more traditional storyline.[2]

What makes *Barbie* so culturally relevant is that, though packaged as a comedy, it challenges us to think soberly about who we are and what our place is in this world. Reinhold Niebuhr is known to have once said, "What is funny about us is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously."[3] *Barbie* allows us to laugh while being introspective. Sometimes it's important to take a step back, laugh a little, search a lot, and find comfort in who God created us to be.

This is where Christians can miss the mark. All too often, Christians focus on what is *wrong* with a movie while missing what is *right*. To engage society and provide the transformative message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ does not mean that Christians must have an opinion or contrarian word on *everything*. Apostle Paul puts it this way:

> And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us. (Acts 17:26–27)

Mind you, Paul is standing in the Areopagus—the high court of justice in ancient Athens —and *not* a Jewish synagogue. He is respectful of the culture and holds out hope that "they should seek God" and "perhaps feel their way toward him and find him." When the cultural amplifier is turned to "high" and a movie crosses the $1 billion

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mark in box office sales, maybe, just maybe, this is a place where the Church should take notice, listen, and learn. The voice of the Church has a place even in Barbie Land.

Silencing the Amplifier

But other movies flow against the current of the time to push the boundaries of our societal understandings and spiritual beliefs. These films challenge social norms, speak against the status quo, and advance ideals and beliefs that are counter to the culture. In so doing, these films create a buzz and typically cause sub-groups of the culture to rise in opposition to the message of the movie.

Look no further for a sub-culture war on a film than Martin Scorsese's 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ.* The screenplay was based on Nikos Kazantzakis's novel of the same name and was adapted by Paul Schrader for the big screen. The gist of the story—and remember, it is based on a *novel* and not the *Bible*—portrays Jesus Christ grappling with human desires such as having a wife and children. Well, for many within the scope of Christendom this was unacceptable because it was incongruent with the "perfect" image of Jesus presented in Scripture. And how did the sub-set of the culture respond to the film? Roman Catholic nuns called the movie blasphemous. Martin Scorsese received death threats. A cinema in Paris was set on fire while the movie was playing. In Singapore, Nikos Kazantzakis's novel was banned from bookstores where it had previously sold for thirty years. The culture had spoken, and the movie by financial measures was a flop, only clearing $1 million more than production costs.

Martin Scorsese, an Italian-American and Roman Catholic has been "working out" his faith on the silver screen for his entire career and has continually woven symbols and themes of faith into his movies. During an interview about *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Harlan Jacobson asked Scorsese, "Is Jesus God, or a man who thinks he's God?" Scorsese had this to say:

> He's God. He's not deluded. I think Kazantzakis thought that, I think the movie says that, and I know I believe that. The beauty of Kazantzakis' concept is that Jesus has to put up with everything we go through, all the doubts and fears and anger. He made me *feel* like he's sinning—but he's not sinning, he's just human. As well as divine. And he has to deal with all this double, triple guilt on the cross. That's the way I directed it, and that's what I wanted, because my own religious feelings are the same. I do a lot of thinking about it, a lot of questioning, a lot of doubting, and then some good feeling. A lot of good feeling. And then a lot more questioning, thinking, doubting![4]

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Of course, Scorsese had a lot more to say—much of which most Christians would agree. However, many within the framework of the Christian community did not want to hear anymore. The movie created a reaction—not necessarily one the director wanted, but a reaction nonetheless. This intersection of culture, cinema, and faith caused a seismic uproar. And that’s okay. The cinematic amplifier projected a director’s personal struggle with faith and people reacted—I am sure some were comforted and affirmed in their faith challenges, while most were abhorred by the portrayal of a very human Jesus. Regardless of what you may personally think about the film, if you engage with it, you see the heart and faith of the man telling you the story—the director Martin Scorsese. Do you have to agree with him? Not at all! But it was his interpretation of Kazantzakis’s story, and he was willing to put that perspective on the screen for the public’s consumption.

The question for the Church in such a moment is this: what opportunity does this film present? Simply reacting against it doesn’t allow the voice of the Gospel to be presented amid the cultural conundrum. Certainly, there are moments when a swift and distancing word needs to be spoken—such as when faith, Scriptural truth and integrity, values, and morality are tossed to the winds. But a film like *The Last Temptation of Christ* gives the Church an opportunity to gently but firmly teach what the truth of Scripture has to say about the salvific story of Jesus. In a very real way, the cultural amplifier invites Christians to the conversation while daring to address subject matter that wholly belongs to the Church. So here is the question: does the Church seize the teachable moment in the culture, or does it simply build higher walls and more secure doors as it reacts to the false teachings?

In a very real way, the cultural amplifier invites Christians to the conversation while daring to address subject matter that wholly belongs to the Church. So here is the question: does the Church seize the teachable moment in the culture, or does it simply build higher walls and more secure doors as it reacts to the false teachings?

BUT It’s Not That Simple . . .

Ideas presented in the world of cinema are a direct reflection of the chaos being unleashed in and on a postmodern society. There is an overarching societal denial of *any* ultimate principles. In other words, postmodern society generally doesn’t trust that there is a source where definitive answers can be found—whether that be science, philosophy, or religion. A paper produced by the Issue Group at the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization’s 2004 Forum puts it this way:

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> In the Modern world there was a belief in an overarching truth—whether informed by a Christian world-view or even a secular belief in progress and in the perfectibility of humanity. Lyotard argued that Modern societies maintained (or even produced) order and stability by generating what he called "grand narratives" or "master narratives."[5]

All this to say that the Judeo-Christian worldview and principles no longer hold the mantle of directing, guiding, and influencing American society. When we sit down to consume cinema, we must understand that the writers, directors, actors, producers, *and audiences* may all hold very different and competing worldviews. If you are a Christian consuming (or participating in) the movie, your faith, principles, and worldview may be in the minority. The irony is that society still clamors for a grand narrative that answers the "big life questions" even though postmodernity dismisses such a notion that grand narratives with absolute truth even exist. But Hollywood sees an opportunity and is not afraid to jump into the fray and try to answer those questions amid the postmodern storm.

This form of cinema has been given the moniker "existentialist cinema." These are films that transcend your typical emotional responses while watching—reactions like laughing, crying, and sitting on the edge of your seat in fear and anticipation. Existential films are the rare few that cause you to think deeply about life and your place in the world. These types of films have existed for almost as long as talking pictures have been around. But in recent years, amid the postmodern cultural crisis, existential films seem to be finding their way onto our screens in every sort of genre.

One recent movie that captivated audiences with its existential reach was the 2022 film *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once.* This movie was relatively unknown until the announcements for the Academy Awards, when it received eleven Oscar nominations and went on to win seven Oscars (Best Picture, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actor, Best Supporting Actress, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Film Edit). In the world of motion pictures, this was one of the biggest nights of all time for a movie that only made $141.2 million. So why was this film so highly regarded by Hollywood?

Set in the backdrop of a multiverse (a hypothetical set of alternate universes that share a universal and similar hierarchy), *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* presents a middle-aged Chinese immigrant woman on a mission to save the whole of reality by connecting with the lives she could have lived in other universes. Hannah Saab and Diego Pineda Pacheco observed,

> The film tackles countless intricate themes like nihilism, love, generational trauma, and parenthood, to name but a few. It's hilarious, it's incredibly emotional, and it's profoundly thought-provoking. The movie argues that if we're already here in this massive and senseless world, we might as well face it with kindness and positivity.[6]

All this to say, this comedic sci-fi drama causes audiences to think—and think deeply. It is more than martial arts meets science fiction meets comedy. It is a movie that causes us to ponder existential questions: What is the purpose of life? Why am I

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here? Is there meaning to my life? What happens when I die? Is there more than the here and now? Many who simply experience the film on the surface fail to understand the acclaim the movie received. But those who experience the film on an existential level witness and receive so much more. After experiencing such a film, the viewer is filled with thoughts and questions not easily answered.

I believe conversations about films are where the Church has its greatest opportunity in the postmodern construct of society. The postmodern person is driven by images that convey the experience of the here and now and desire to be connected to something greater than self. And there is no greater contemporary image than what is played out on the silver screen. Within this current existential crisis, the Church has an opportunity to speak and serve. Erwin Raphael McManus writes,

> Relevance is . . . about embracing the principle that we are to value the one lost sheep even more than the 99 that are found. It is waking up to the realization that the church isn’t here for we who believe, but rather that we in fact are the church, and we are here for a world drowning in disbelief . . . Relevance is not about having everyone agree with you. It is about speaking the truth of Christ honestly and credibly into a person’s life. When we speak relevantly to the world we live in, there is a resonance of reality and authenticity.[7]

When writers, directors, and producers of movies are willing to jump into relevant existential conversations, why is the Church so hesitant? Existential movies are not afraid to challenge the audience to think and respond. Movies like *Birdman, Sideways, The Truman Show, Apocalypse Now, Fight Club,* and just about any Wes Anderson directed movie (such as *Moonrise Kingdom, The Grande Budapest Hotel,* and *Asteroid City*) are more than willing to raise and attempt to answer larger-than-life questions. Why are these movies successful? Because they are relevant to the existential crisis society is experiencing.

Now is the time for the Church to cast off its hesitancy and be willing to wade into the postmodern societal mess and speak—*with truth and in love*—into the crisis demonstrated, mimicked, and masked through Hollywood productions. The Church is ideally situated to engage in these cinematic conversations with answers that have depth and width regarding existential questions. Remember the words from Jesus in His High Priestly Prayer: “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). Consider yourself “sent” to engage the conversation. This means listening carefully, loving deeply, and speaking gently.

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The purpose of the Church in postmodern culture is to reflect Christ to the people *in the culture.* This is an evangelistic reflection of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is relevant to the point that it conveys the comforting message of sins forgiven and a life that has deeper purpose and meaning than the culture can provide. The answers are not found within oneself—nor are they found in the images and voices found on the "big screen" (or on the smaller screens in our homes). The answers that society seeks are found in Christ alone—and it is our job to be the amplifiers of that message to a world caught in the cultural maelstrom of postmodernity.

The answers that society seeks are found in Christ alone—and it is our job to be the amplifiers of that message to a world caught in the cultural maelstrom of postmodernity.

Roll the Credits . . .

> As God's children, we live in a culture. We cannot avoid or run from it. We live where God has placed us—and in that place the culture surrounds us. The apostle Paul was keenly aware of the challenges posed at intersections of Christ and culture. Paul writes to the Ephesians, Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. . . . for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. (Eph 5:1, 8–11)

Be Christ-like in your culture. Love people wonderfully and sacrificially. Reflect the light of the Gospel to those you encounter, and illuminate the darkness of sin that pervades humankind. Interact with the culture, understand the culture, challenge the culture with the truth that is Jesus Christ.

And then the three—cinema, culture, and faith—converge. Cinema is the vehicle by which cultural expression finds its artistic release in a way that the widest breath of humankind can receive it. Cinema evokes a powerful personal expression. We love it or we hate it. We cry, we laugh, we ponder, we get angry, and we even mourn. We are drawn to it or repelled by it. And the funny thing about cinema is that we are willing to pay for it so that our cultural boundaries can be pushed, prodded, stretched, and challenged.

As we sit in that darkened theater (or in front of our personal screens), there is this echoing voice speaking into our heart and soul—the voice of faith. The voice of faith projects into the stories on the big screen and says "yes" or "no." The voice of faith recognizes the needs of the hurting, the wanderings of the sinful and broken, and the work of the devil who is desperately trying to corrupt and co-opt the culture. As lifelike narratives play out on this amazing medium, God's Word anchors us in His eternal truth and reminds us that we are His witnesses in and to the culture. So we shed light—the light of Jesus—into the darkness of culture as depicted on the big screen.

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Endnotes

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Impacting the Workplace: A New Conceptual Framework Where Vocational Calling Meets Missional Competencies

Lori B. Doyle, Jill L. Swisher

Abstract

While some Christians work in specifically Christian workplaces or contexts, the majority of Christians work in environments that would not be described as Christian or that might even be characterized as hostile toward Christian morals and values. No matter the environment, Christians can embrace a vocational mindset and recognize ways they are able to serve others in both left-hand and right-hand kingdom opportunities as they present in mundane as well as miraculous moments. Yet it is often the opportunities to explicitly share about one's faith that go unnoticed or even ignored due to feelings of inadequacy, apprehension, or unpreparedness. This is where the concept of missional competencies can be utilized for training, supporting, and encouraging Christians working in secular fields and workplaces. The authors of the current paper suggest a new conceptual framework where vocational calling meets missional competencies and discuss the impact on individuals, churches, schools, and institutions of higher education. Suggestions for future research are also provided regarding ways to measure, analyze, and continue the discussion on how best to apply and study the benefits of this new framework of support for Christians working in but not of the world.

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Impacting the Workplace: A New Conceptual Framework Where Vocational Calling Meets Missional Competencies

One way that Christians engage in society is through their workplaces. Within their vocations, Christians are called to be faithful to the Gospel by working diligently as unto the Lord and taking opportunities to share the Gospel. Secular environments pose unique challenges to this pursuit of Christian faithfulness, but this does not negate the responsibility to live and work faithfully. Having a vocational mindset is to recognize opportunities to serve others in any role, any environment, and any moment as the masks of God.[1]

Understanding and recognizing personal missional competencies can allow believers to participate in evangelism even in public or secular spaces. While God calls people to serve through *all* of their various roles, relationships, and responsibilities, many believers spend a majority of their daily lives at work. The authors of the current article posit a new conceptual approach to workplace thriving based on the combination of a vocational mindset and areas of personal missional competency. While this approach can be applied to any of life's vocations, this paper is primarily focused on impacting the workplace. Applications for individuals, the Church, schools, and institutions of higher education will be discussed regarding ways to prepare and support those who are currently in the workforce and those who are thinking about and being trained to enter a professional sphere. Suggestions for future research will provide pathways for continuing the work of measuring and analyzing the new conceptual framework suggested in this paper.

Context

Many Christians do not know or understand whether their work is important, especially if they are not directly working in ministry. A recent post by a corporate-turned-ministry-employed product manager emphasizes this feeling: "I have been on my career journey in big and small organizations for 35 years. I have witnessed different organizational culture models and shifts along the way. In each of those places, my heart desired to find myself at the intersection of where my gifts and strengths met my passion for impacting eternal souls."[2] While every Christian has been commissioned to care about eternal souls (Matt 28:19), not every Christian has an opportunity to work in ministry.

"God is the first worker and humans are called to imitate God. You see a human at work? You see the image of God."[3] The Lutheran understanding of vocation is that God is sovereign and at work in left-hand and right-hand reigns. God's Spirit moves in the right-hand reign to create faith and sanctify, whereas His imagers work in the left-hand reign to serve others in His place and by His design.[4] Human imagers, even those indwelled by the Holy Spirit (i.e., Christians), cannot bring about salvation for others, but they are God's co-workers bringing order, beauty, and care from which we and others benefit.[5] "The purpose of God's call is for the people of God to worship

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God, and to participate in God's creative and redemptive purpose for the world."[6] Of course, sin has entangled our work as it has with every aspect of our fallen world, but our vocations have an intrinsic purpose in serving our neighbors. As Schuurman describes, "the freedom of the gospel deepens the motive and enhances the effectiveness of love for God and neighbor."[7] As Paul exhorts, "do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal 5:13). While a secular understanding of vocation refers only to one's paid work, a Christian understanding includes all roles, relationships, and responsibilities that allow a person to deliver God's gifts to their neighbors.[8] Since some Christians have described feeling unable to make an impact at their workplaces, this paper is primarily concerned with the importance of workplace vocations.

Many works on vocation have gone to great lengths to impart an understanding that vocation has meaning even for those who are not clergy or otherwise working in fields tied to right-hand reign matters. This is important because many Christians have been called into occupations that are entirely secular or even undervalued in modern society: the custodian, the garbage collector, the childcare worker, the nursing assistant, the public school teacher, and so many more. These callings are vitally important to society at large, as well as in-and-of-themselves as so many have argued.[9] This paper affirms the importance of secular vocations and also extends the importance to include their presentation as a vast mission field.

Problem

Many protestants enjoy a nuanced understanding of vocation as the presence of God in ordinary life. Yet in teaching the doctrine of vocation, there is a gap in identifying the missional aspects that can be cultivated in everyday work. The purpose of this paper is to address this gap by investigating the development of missional competencies for any worker and to suggest a conceptual framework that combines the best of both workplace approaches. The suggestion is for Christians working in secular workplaces to first understand and view their work with a vocational mindset, yet be prepared to confidently engage in evangelism by way of specific and proactively determined areas of missional competency. By employing this conceptual framework, the left-hand tasks associated with serving one's neighbor are elevated and the fears surrounding evangelism in the workplace are diminished.

The need is great for sharing the Gospel, and this need presents even more prominently in secular workplaces. A vocational mindset means to see all workplaces, including secular ones, as places where God is at work in the lives of people. However, Christian employees often hesitate to testify about their faith out of fear of retaliation or because they do not feel equipped or prepared when an opportunity presents itself. There is a temptation for Christians to try to blend in or disappear into the secular landscape or find contentment in simply waiting for others to approach them and ask about their faith or good works (Matt 5:16).

There are many workplace environments and many ways to witness; therefore, it is not logical to suggest that approaches to sharing the Gospel are one-size-fits-all or congruent with a ten-step process. One solution is to encourage an outlook that

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embraces the workplace as a mission field rather than a neutral environment. Helping Christian employees proactively think about the gifts and abilities they have and how those can be leveraged for the good of the Gospel can be a helpful step in preparing their hearts and minds for the mission set before them. Discovering and embracing missional competencies is one way for Christians working in secular fields or workplaces to be bold yet wise about the contexts and opportunities unique to their sphere of influence. A Christian worker who understands their secular position as one of their many vocational callings can contemplate their missional competencies to find ways to witness while also remaining gainfully employed.

Theoretical Framework

Christians work in all facets of society. Some workplaces can be described as conducive to or even established as Christian working environments, but most are not inherently organized around this understanding. In fact, some workplaces can even feel hostile toward Christian values and a biblical worldview. Yet, as Loy reminds us, "having a vocation does not mean that we are called out of the spaces we inhabit in common with unbelievers."[10] The theoretical workplace frameworks of vocational calling and missional competencies can be embraced and even combined to help Christian employees in any field work with integrity and shine brightly through good works to the glory of God (Matt 5:16).

Vocational Calling

There is a spiritual dimension to work[11] and the lens of vocational calling adds meaning to the labors of life.[12] This truth can be applied to the work of everyday life and any facet of one's existence within a community. The doctrine of vocation considers how a Christian lives faithfully in the world—as a citizen, as a human, and a worker. Veith confirms the great deal of confusion that exists around the concept of vocation and the role of Christians in society.[13] Keller emphasizes biblical wisdom as integral regarding an accurate and helpful understanding of what it means to work.[14] Following Luther's teaching, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod puts it like this: "On the surface, we see an ordinary human face—our mother, the doctor, the teacher, the waitress, our pastor—but, beneath the appearances, God is ministering to us through them. God is hidden in human vocations."[15]

Missional Competencies

An evangelical missional mindset is one based in the Great Commission and a desire to bring Jesus to "the unknown, unreached, and uncomfortable areas" in society and the world.[16] The mission of the Church is to "confess and proclaim the forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake . . . by the daily *witness* of the baptized children of God, His royal priesthood."[17] Kuhlman articulates it this way:

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> Evangelism finds its origin in an incarnational, sending God. Scripture is filled with prophets *sent* with messages to give, ordinary men and women *sent* with divinely mandated tasks to perform, disciples *sent* with ministry to perform, and even God's own Son is *sent* with a purpose to complete. Sending is at the heart of what the Lord does.[18]

In the Lutheran context, historically, "mission-mindedness largely involved sending professional clergymen to some other countries . . . We were not sufficiently concerned about telling our neighbor about Jesus Christ or sharing the Gospel in our own community."[19] This awareness led to the addition of evangelism to the dimensions of mission-mindedness, which added both lay witness and local witnessing to church body goals. Even in 1979, Lutherans acknowledged the following:

> A third aspect of adding evangelism to missions is the adding of the personal to the objective. This addition is difficult for Lutherans, who have always emphasized the objective truth of the Scripture. We have stressed the intellectual aspects of faith, understanding the catechism and accepting it with our mind. But when we witness to our friends and neighbors, we need to say not only, 'This is what the Bible says,' but also, 'This is what I believe'; 'This is what Jesus has done in my life.'[20]

The personal aspect of evangelism is that it is a competency or set of competencies that need development, which is not of itself a brand-new idea. This concept is supported through theologians and organizations with a focus on the need for evangelism in missional fields that include one's own personal sphere of influence. For example, the idea of *missional competency* and related skills is unpacked by the mission-minded, church-planting movement, Acts 29, founded in 1998. Acts 29 is a trans-denominational network that "plant[s] churches worldwide by recruiting, assessing, training, and supporting church planters."[21] The organization has identified eleven competencies needed for church plant leaders with specific learnable skills within each of those competencies. While some of the competencies apply more pointedly to the process of church planting, many can be extended to also apply to the individual planting of seeds that accompanies any act of evangelistic labor. The areas of missional competency from the Acts 29 list that apply most readily to workplace evangelism are shown in Table 1 and are each accompanied with an example of a micro skill for that competency.

TABLE 1. *Acts 29 Missional Competencies with related micro skills.*

Competency	Example (one of many micro skills for each competency)
Spiritual Vitality	"Knows the importance of prayer, not only as a means to the end of gospel ministry but also as an expression of an intimate & dependent relationship (Colossians 1:3–5; Philippians 1:3–8)."
Theological	"Possesses a clear understanding of sound doctrine (Acts

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Clarity	20:28–31; 1 Timothy 6:3–5; Titus 1:5–9; 2:1, 15; Jude 3)."
Conviction& Commendation	"Communicates a compelling personal conviction (Acts 16:6–10) and a clear strategy (Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 2:41–47; 16:9, 12; Titus 1:5)."
Relationships	"Establishes & maintains, as far as is possible, healthy relationships with Christians & non-Christians (Romans 12:18; Colossians 4:5–6; 1 Timothy 3:7; 2 Timothy 2:24–25; 1 Peter 2:12)."
Missional Lifestyle	"Demonstrates a passion to reach others through relationships & evangelism (Matthew 9:37–38; 28:18–20; Romans 1:16; 10:10–17; 2 Timothy 4:5) and consistently & effectively shares faith in a manner understood by non-Christians (Acts 17:16–34)."
Disciple Making	"Effective plan for discipleship and is skilled in establishing & multiplying small groups (Acts 14:21–23)."
Ability to Teach	"Demonstrates exegetical & expositional competency (2 Timothy 2:15; 4:2–4; Titus 1:9; 2:1) and able to teach the Bible into specific contexts & audiences (Acts 20:20–21; Romans 1:14–15; 1 Corinthians 9:19–23)."

Source: "Competencies," Acts 29, accessed October 8, 2023, https://www.acts29.com/competencies/.

Note: This table contains some of the competencies and is a partial list. The competencies more specific to church planting were purposely not included for the sake of clarity. The authors focus on and highlight the competencies with direct application to evangelism in the workplace.

Other church-planting organizations such as the late Timothy Keller's City Church also identify particular competencies which Keller first outlined in 2001 and are as follows: speak in the vernacular, enter and retell the culture's stories with the Gospel, theologically train laypeople for public life and vocation, create Christian community that is countercultural and counterintuitive, and practice Christian unity as much as possible on the local level. Of great relevance to the current study is the third skill to train laypeople for their vocations. Specifically, Keller notes, "the laity needs theological education to 'think Christianly' about everything and to work with Christian distinctiveness" while at the same time "demonstrate true, biblical love and tolerance in the public square toward those with whom we deeply differ."[22]

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While not every believer is called to the vocation of church planting and may or may not need to be trained in every micro skill, every believer is called to the Great Commission and the planting of seeds. In his book on Christian mission, John Dickson delivers this point by indicating a distinction between one whose calling is the specific role of evangelist versus the callings of all believers to the Great Commission. He argues that there are six practical ways that scripture shows how even non-evangelist believers can be missionally competent in promoting the Gospel: with prayer, with finances, through the works of their church, through Christian behavior, through public praise, and in daily conversations.[23] Indeed, Jillson discovered that Christians in public education actually possess some of those certain competencies which are discernable through their specific behaviors.[24] For example, "Christian teachers in K-12 public schools pray, read the Bible, [and] attend corporate worship,"[25] which are markers of the "spiritual vitality" competency, and even show evidence of all tested competencies. Beyond simply having an "apt reply"[26] ready for every conversation, having these specific aptitudes enables Christians in secular spaces to live intentional Christian lives. Even though mission-mindedness in the Lutheran Church was historically discussed regarding global missions and later by acknowledging the need for adding the personal to the objective, it can and should also be applied to all areas of personal and daily influence, the workplace being one such place where this can and should happen. Because missional skills and aptitudes are teachable and have been appropriated for use in research, they have a place to be considered alongside the concept of vocation and can be apportioned where suitable for vocational application.

A New Conceptual Framework

Based on the existing foundations of vocation and missional competencies, the authors of this paper suggest a conceptual framework that combines the inherent aspects of vocation with the skills-based elements of missional competencies. Together, this conceptual approach elevates every workplace as ripe with opportunities to serve others and to go further by recognizing specific opportunities to take a missional approach to service through purposeful evangelism in the workplace. A vocation mindset elevates every moment to a place of importance regarding the call to love one another, and a missional-competencies mindset encourages Christians working in secular spaces to capitalize on specific moments in time for right-hand kingdom work. The conceptual framework being suggested does not downplay the need for having a vocational mindset nor does it diminish the role of understanding missional competencies. Rather, these should always be woven together.

When describing the workplace in terms of vocation, Wingren declares it to be the place where workers can bring God's gifts to others,[27] and Taylor describes this as loving others by providing what is needed.[28] Those same workers can think on and even practice using missional competencies when an opportunity presents for lovingly addressing someone's need to know about Jesus.

Perhaps one pitfall associated with only applying a vocational mindset regarding the secular workplace is the possibility of giving so much importance to left-hand kingdom service and concern that opportunities to think right-handedly in the

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workplace get glossed over or even missed. On the other hand, a stance that one is only serving in the workplace during right-hand kingdom moments of missional evangelism is to overlook the significance of the mundane.[29] When the concepts of vocation and missional competency are combined, the approach means recognizing that everyone is body, mind, and spirit and then being open and ready to lovingly work to address the root of someone else's need. Possibly, a person's need is in body or mind and a left-hand act of service is most loving. However, the need might present in the spiritual realm and require right-hand evangelism.

The vocational-missional framework and approach can be exemplified when a Christian public school teacher hears a colleague complain about being worn down by a challenging student who continues to act out and disrupt the class. Offering to bring them their favorite vanilla latte the next day is to serve in body and fulfills the vocational calling to meet the needs of others in body and mind. But the same concerned colleague can also serve by using the moment to describe how it is helpful for them to think of challenging students as fearfully and wonderfully made and loved by God (Psalm 139:14). This colleague has applied the missional competency of conviction and commendation by sharing a Bible-based strategy for working with challenging students, and by doing so in a non-threatening way, has potentially avoided the pitfall of sounding judgmental or accusatory toward the disgruntled colleague.

The concept of proactively pondering areas of missional competency is rooted in the fact that moments to share or speak right-handedly, or serve others in spirit, are often overlooked or dismissed out of fear or a lack of confidence. The Christian co-worker might have easily missed the opportunity, might have worded the commendation differently, or might have stopped at filling a physical need. Rather, the workplace evangelist capitalized on an earlier recognition of missional competency in the area of conviction and was ready with the micro skill of communicating a compelling personal conviction as a way of sharing a Biblical truth. Important to communicate here is that there are times when meeting a physical need is the necessary or best way to serve one's workplace neighbor. However, a worker who combines a vocational mindset with a proactive understanding of missional competencies is equipped to move between left-hand and right-hand service with greater confidence and less apprehension.

Applications

Christians "are called to faithful, transformative participation in the life of this world."[30] To avoid bias toward one direction on the spectrum of witness in secular workplaces, from quiet service to overt evangelism, it can be helpful to consider the ways in which a vocational-missional framework can be applied. In a work context and as a research construct, "callings and vocations can be pursued within all occupations."[31] In the context of workplaces, a focus on vocation reminds the worker that "the proximity of the needs of those nearby combines with the availability of resources to place priority on service to those close at hand."[32] A missional approach

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to vocation has applications in several avenues, including, but not limited to, the individual, the Church, schools, and institutions of higher education.

On the individual level, it is important to look at one's areas of competence and identify the areas of growth needed as well as ways in which vocation and skill intersect in order to leverage those skills for missional opportunity. As Keaton indicates, employees who have influence over whatever space they are in "can use cognitive, motivational, and behavioral strategies to help them increase job performance [and] self-leadership to aid them in becoming more missionally competent at an earlier . . . point in their career."[33] Most adults spend a large percentage of their time—whether in a physical or virtual work space—creating, maintaining, or establishing relationships with others as a direct result of the work environment. For this reason, Christians working in any setting, but especially those in a secular work environment, can benefit from combining a strong awareness of vocation, which includes recognizing the daily opportunities to serve others, as well as confidence that comes from understanding personal missional competencies, for those times when service presents as an opportunity to evangelize.

Churches can assist with this by developing classes or training programs targeted for parishioners in secular workplaces. The classes would focus both on doctrinal training in vocation as well as on missional micro skill development. For example, a church might hold a Bible class to improve the theological clarity competency, or teach a course using Youth for Christ's (formerly YoungLife) three-story evangelism approach [34] to give participants the confidence and skills needed to evangelize through storytelling in the workplace, contributing to competency in a missional lifestyle. Even in regard to church worship, Tiefel argues that a commitment to Lutheran liturgical worship has contributed to evangelism, outreach, and the growth of disciples because "the Liturgy showcases that which the Holy Spirit used to make disciples: Word and Sacrament."[35]

Schools, both public and private, are also ripe for evangelistic purposes. In one example from the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), their 2022 School Statistics Analysis Report noted there are 1,855 LCMS schools with 21,191 educators serving over 162,000 pupils; of the pupils, only 38,000 (27%) report themselves as LCMS members.[36] Likewise, in 2017 only 5,523 of 40,283 enrolled in Lutheran Education Australia's Schools (LEA) self-disclosed as Lutheran by religion.[37] This represents a mission field which is in need of outreach. As Valleskey notes, "it is only natural that the Lutheran elementary school, which is a part of the congregation, should see the purpose of the congregation as its purpose also."[38] Steinberg[39] identifies best practices by which to serve this purpose, including having a staff member dedicated to outreach, having the pastor(s) serve visibly in the school, and having a consistent invitation to discipleship. Additionally, an important consideration for career development professionals in the context of both public and private schools is "the extent to which a calling or sense of vocation can be encouraged or instilled in individuals with career-related concerns."[40] Keaton furthermore notes the importance for public and private school teachers to use self-leadership strategies to become more missionally competent.[41]

At the university and seminary levels, institutions have tended to focus more on one or the other in terms of vocation and missiology. Rather than leaving one out, it is

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important for educational programs to assign importance to both and to remain "acutely aware of the need for creative fusions of Christian beliefs and practices with the cultural contexts in which the church finds itself."[42] Overall, there are many areas in which the intersection of vocation and mission form a praxis for Christian living. Higher education program developers and professors can consider the proposed vocational-missional framework as one approach rather than two distinct or stand-alone approaches to training future workers in any field for the work of recognizing opportunities to serve one's neighbor in body, mind, and spirit.

Future Research

The current paper is focused primarily on establishing a new conceptual framework for how Christians can work with integrity in secular workplaces. While data on the topics of vocation and missional competencies were not collected or analyzed to determine empirical results, there are ways to extend the conceptual framework through qualitative and or quantitative methods. For example, qualitative research questions can be written to investigate workers' perceptions of vocation and or their personal areas of missional competency. To investigate the framework using quantitative methods, survey scales can be used to discover correlations between aspects of vocation and missional competencies. The authors of this paper suggest a new framework for investigating the mindset and role of Christians working in secular spaces and suggest there is room for research studies that apply a narrow focus on associated and related variables and phenomena.

Conclusions

Rooted in the gap of identifying the evangelistic aspects that can be cultivated in everyday work, the authors of this study suggest a new conceptual framework for the study of Christians in secular workplaces that combines the doctrine of vocation with the practice of missional competency. Implications are discussed regarding ways for individuals, churches, schools, and institutions of higher education to respond and apply the vocational-missional framework and suggestions for future research extensions are provided as pathways to collecting and analyzing data to further extend the framework empirically. As Schuurman rhetorically considers, "who can measure the degree to which Christendom . . . expressed the leavening influences of the gospel? The gospel must take shape in language, music, story, the arts, forms of community, and more. This process necessarily involves a creative fusion of the gospel with elements of the surrounding civilization."[43] The current authors suggest that "creative fusion" in the secular workplace should be based on the coalescence of vocation and mission in order to impact the world with grace and truth.

Endnotes

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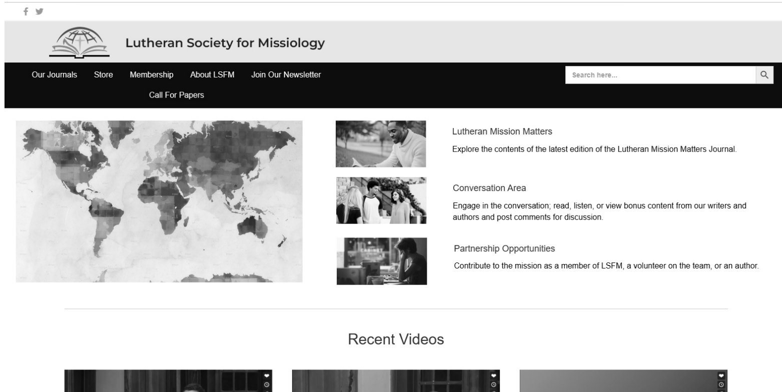

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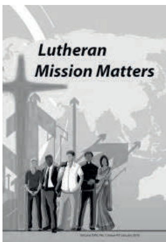

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Mission Observer

Relevant Gospel Message

Herb Hoefer

In my theological training, I was told that the two great messages of the Gospel were the assurance of forgiveness of sin and the assurance of heaven. Those were the burning issues of the church where Lutheranism was born. Central to these messages was the substitutionary atonement achieved by the crucifixion. However, both in my missionary service and in my congregational ministry, these were not the most important messages of the Gospel. In some contexts, in fact, I found these messages to be irrelevant and even counterproductive.

The first example I'll offer is based on my fifteen years of missionary service in India. I served in two contexts: basically half in rural India and half in urban India, half among Dalits (a.k.a. outcastes) and half among caste Hindus and Muslims.

What was the Gospel message that proved relevant to Dalits?: *my value as a beloved child of God*. For millennia, Dalits had received the message in Hinduism that they were unclean and despicable. Because of their unworthy previous lives, they were condemned to be born in this caste. They were to perform only the filthiest tasks of society, befitting their uncleanness.

The good news of the Gospel was that the message of Hinduism was untrue. Instead, they were beloved and valued children of God. They did not deserve cruel treatment and suppression. They deserved respect and opportunity and hope. This uplifting Gospel message gave them new self-respect, and the Church and mission gave them opportunity.

This Gospel message was more ontological than salvific. The crucifixion had a contributory Gospel message: that "God so loved" me that He sent His Son, and the

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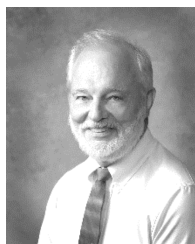

The Rev. Dr. Herb Hoefer served as an LCMS missionary to India for 15 years, as a parish pastor in Wisconsin for 13 years, and as a Professor of Theology at Concordia University-Portland for 16 years. While at Concordia-Portland, he also served as LCMS Area Director for South Asia for ten years. His books and articles have been primarily on topics of faith and culture, particularly on outreach to Hindus and Muslims.

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Son so valued me that He went to the cross for me. But the forgiveness of sin through the substitutionary atonement was not the great liberating message.

What was the Gospel message that proved relevant to caste Hindus and Muslims?: *God is love*. So much of classical Hinduism and Islam is fear-based. In Hinduism, the gods are whimsical, and karma is heartless. In Islam, God is the fearsome lawgiver and judge. If Jesus is the Presence of God on earth, then God is not heartless and fearsome. He is like Jesus, reliably loving and caring.

The message of substitutionary atonement through the cross is irrelevant and often counter-productive. For Muslims, of course, the Quran teaches that Jesus was not crucified. Thus, we don't begin our presentation of the Gospel with that topic. We begin with the person and ministry of Jesus and what that says about the character of God. For Hindus, the message that God the Father needed the shedding of blood and the gruesome sacrifice of His Son to be forgiving is offensive to their non-violent sensitivities. It undercuts and contradicts the attractive message of His loving character. For both Hindus and Muslims, the thought is that a totally loving God, in His freedom and grace, could—and should—simply forgive. We don't begin with the cross of Jesus; we begin with His life.

For spiritist societies, the law situation is fear of spirits: *They can really hurt me. How do I control them? How do I please them?* The good news is the message of the ascended Lord, Jesus. All things are "under His feet," including the spirit worlds. At the name of Jesus, "every knee must bow," including all of the spirit world. You need not fear when the Holy Spirit has brought you to faith and the enthroned Jesus has become the Lord of your life.

The second example I'll offer is based on my pastoral ministry in the States. When I was teaching in Northeast India a few years back, a pastor asked me about the demise of the church in America. He was distraught that the denomination that had brought the Gospel to his region was now in decline. Christianity in that region is very strong and energized by vibrant youth leadership. He asked, "What should we do so that we don't end up like our mother church?" I was a bit taken aback but replied, "Don't just talk about heaven."

Christianity should be an adventure. It should be an exciting life. Our youth should be energized and directed into a dynamic pilgrimage with Christ as the ascended Lord of their lives. Our teaching should be a training of the heart and spirit. But so much of our catechetics is teaching of correct doctrine. It is listening and learning, not *doing*. We do not harness and utilize the energy of our youth. We cater our programs and our preaching to the elderly, who run and finance the church.

Elsewhere in the world, where the church is dynamic and growing, it is youth-led. It is addressing the issues of the society. It is love in action. It is a worthwhile life. Worship services are driven by youthful energy. Adults are coaches and cheerleaders. The Gospel message is the ascended Lord and the vitalizing Spirit. The focus is not on

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the forgiveness of sin, but on the overcoming of sin. The good news is God leading and inspiring us to a worthwhile, meaningful life.

We must recognize that the Gospel is multifaceted. It is good news in different ways for different situations. It is the answer to all of life's needs and hopes, at every stage of life, and in every culture. The burning issues of sixteenth century Europe are not the issues of every culture in the twenty-first century. We are not relevantly proclaiming the Gospel by simply saying Jesus died on the cross and rose again. In every context the governing question must be, What is the good news from God relevant to this situation?

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Faith and Culture: An Interview with FLAME

Missiology regularly deals with abstract ideas about communicating the Gospel and the reaction to that Gospel in cross-cultural settings. A highly influential cross-cultural setting in the contemporary world is the musical genre of hip-hop. The Christian rap artist FLAME recently spoke with an editor of *Lutheran Mission Matters,* James Marriott, to describe in his own words his personal spiritual journey and the contribution rap music makes to the communication of the Christian faith. *LMM* thanks him for his contribution. What follows is an edited transcription of the interview, which took place on July 13, 2023.

James Marriott: The prompt for our conversation today is the interaction of faith and culture, acknowledging that there is a significant relationship between Gospel and culture. As we at *Lutheran Mission Matters* were talking about different contributors, you came to my mind as someone who'd have a unique voice on that relationship. Could you start by telling us a little bit about yourself?

FLAME: Absolutely. My name is FLAME. Well, that's my artist name. My given name is Marcus Gray. I am a Christian rap artist from St. Louis, Missouri. What I enjoy doing is taking biblical theology, systematic theology, and sort of connecting the dots with our practical, mundane, everyday lives, showing the connectivity between these weighty truths, and how they impact what we do on the regular. Then I like to try to make it rhyme and make it cool and fun and accessible through punch lines, similes, metaphors, cultural references, things of that sort—so people can kind of get a better sense of who we are as humans. Maybe what God was up to with creating us, and how we drop the ball after that. But then He comes to rescue us by His Son, Jesus.

James Marriott: Yeah, that's cool. Do you have a quick example that comes to mind? The reader would appreciate hearing the turn of phrase that you would use that would create that cultural resonance with a theological connection.

FLAME: Yeah, let me see. I'm flipping through my database of songs. So in the hip-hop culture cars are celebrated. You get a regular car and you put rims on it. Often a new paint job, too. In one of my songs, I make reference to a certain type of rim, like you put this rim on your car and it spins when you drive. It just gives this cool effect. I said, "just like your rims still spin even after your car stops, then where will you spend eternity after your heart stops?" So it's kind of a play on words, a play on that cultural reference that's readily available on people's minds in terms of hip-hop culture.

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James Marriott: I want to ask you more about your engagement with hip-hop culture, but let's start with a bit more on your theological journey from Calvinism to Lutheranism.

FLAME: As I grew up, I was primarily taught Christianity by my grandmother and my mom. So I remember just as a kid, they sort of catechized me. I remember learning about the Trinity, the nature of Christ, the resurrection. And then I got plugged into a local church. It was a charismatic church with some prosperity leanings, but nothing over the top. It was fairly balanced in terms of that world.

But, later on, the message was a lot more extreme and didn't sound like the stuff my grandmother had taught me, or that my mom had taught me. At that point, I remember sort of questioning it and being confused by this new emphasis on God wanting to make you rich, or God promising us healing and sort of this easy life. That didn't really reflect my experience, nor the things I was taught. So in that moment I was introduced to Calvinistic thought.

I was on the tour with another Christian rap group, and they sort of introduced the Reformation to us young guys, and we had no idea about the Reformation. They asked us whether we were Calvinists or Armenians. And I was like, I don't know anything about those games. You know. I'm neutral. I just work for Jesus. And that's when they started to inform us about, you know, this whole portion of church history that just got lost on us in a hood context. So I realized pretty quickly that the guys on tour were mostly Calvinistic, and I figured that was the right thing to, you know, believe. So for about eighteen years I gave myself to Calvinism, pushing it through my music, teaching it in practical ways.

I think it felt helpful because of this emphasis on God's sovereignty. From my background growing up in the inner city, asking the big questions about culture and society and politics, this thing about God's sovereignty sounded like a cure: God's in control. He knows what's best for you. Just accept it. That sort of thing. And I was like, okay, I think I can find some comfort here, and I think I'm tracking it down in Scripture based on the way they were teaching it.

I lived in that space for about eighteen years, until certain ideas started to become soul-crushing and haunting. For instance, they will argue that Jesus did not die for everyone. They argue that God, in fact, created some people just for judgment, because He wants to show off His wrath. God thinks it's cool to demonstrate how wrathful He is. So He creates humans just for that expression. And over time that became crushing. How do I know if I'm one of the ones Jesus died for? How do I know if I'm created for judgment?

There's this concept in Reformed theology that you can be a deceived convert, so to speak. You can think you're a Christian but not really be one. So you really get busy trying to prove to yourself and to God and to others that you really want to be elect. So you're doing your best to be a pious person, not only externally, but internally. You're trying to get your thoughts right, your affections, your mood, your mentality. You're always examining yourself, making sure that you're on par with all

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things consistent with what it means in that construct to be a Christian. Yeah. That put me in sort of a funk over time.

James Marriott: Talk about the turn then to Lutheranism. The readers will be pretty steeped in Lutheran theology, but maybe give us a few of the anchors that really became compelling and that have been integrated into your artistry.

FLAME: Yeah, for sure. I was exposed to Concordia Seminary through a close friend of mine, who recommended it because it was recommended to him by a Reformed Baptist professor and pastor. So that's pretty ironic. He told my friend, "Hey, man, if you're going back to St. Louis, make sure you check out Concordia Seminary." So I end up checking it out. But I was still just super lit about John Calvin. I remember Dr. [Gerhard] Bode giving me a tour of campus, and I'm talking his head off about how John Calvin saved Christianity, and, you know, that kind of thing. Eventually he looked at me and said, "You know this is a Lutheran University. There are some distinctives there."

But I still didn't really get it, you know. My first class in the program was "Lutheran Mind," and that's where, they sort of broke up the fallow ground. It was kind of like, "Oh, wow! There are some major differences here." I had moments of panic in all of this. I felt like maybe I was being deceived and joining a cult or something like that. I had nerves. There was this sense of betrayal I had to wrestle with, because I felt like I was being unfaithful to the men and women who had invested in my maturity and spiritual growth by attending this school.

But I also felt confidence in the fact that they did teach the doctrine of justification by faith alone. So I decided to hear them out. I was really drawn by the emphasis [of justification by faith alone] taught clearly there. That was very familiar to things I had already agreed with in terms of Calvinism. But then they introduced the sacraments into the story, and that's where things got to be interesting, because there was still this deep-rooted nature of justification by faith alone. But it was also undergirded by these other elements of assurance and hope and good news, which was, you know, the Lord using Baptism, Word and water, to deliver His gifts of salvation and forgiveness. Or the Lord's Supper, another one, where Jesus just bodily visits us in some mystical union through bread and wine. Those things were off-putting at first.

> But then they introduced the sacraments into the story, and that's where things got to be interesting, because there was still this deep-rooted nature of justification by faith alone.

But, over time, I heard a bit of hope and flickers of light flashed into this dark place that I was sinking into. So I was like, "Man, I think this is a good thing, but I want to see it in Scripture." So, over the course of two years, I just sort of gave myself to listening to the lectures from all the professors, taking notes, profoundly revisiting

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all the lectures and notes immediately after class when I got home, going through them all over again in the same day, and that was my practice religiously.

And once I graduated in 2018, I took that entire year off, you know, to just work through everything outside of the academic environment. And I was like, "Man, I can't unsee this. I think this stuff is right here in the text." Then I committed myself to Lutheran thought in 2019. And the story continues.

James Marriott: Tell me about hip-hop, then, as a genre, because you aren't unique in this intersection of faith and culture. You're not the only one doing this kind of artistry, but it is unique, especially in some Lutheran circles. And many of the people reading this won't necessarily see hip-hop as a cultural mechanism for proclaiming the Gospel. So talk a little bit about your engagement with hip-hop, the cultural affiliations of hip-hop, and its instrumental use for the Gospel.

FLAME: Absolutely. Great question. It's interesting, too. I have to tip my hat again to my grandmother. As a kid, I was always listening to rap music. The worst kind. Lyrics that were vile, full of murder, drugs, glorifying those things as if they were cool. I remember a song in particular where this guy is rapping about taking a life, and it was very dark, but poetically it was brilliant. And the music itself was just so good. Heavy on the strings, the piano, the drums. But it was a dark song.

And my grandmother, she just did not like me listening to that stuff, but she knew it was the soundtrack of this generation. So, rather than crushing my dream, in a genius way she suggested, "I see you like this rap music. Why don't you study your schoolwork and things that interest you, and write songs about them? And in that way, when you go to school, you can take all your tests and have all the answers you want committed to memory and life. You can have songs about it and recall it just like that." And when she said that, it was just this light bulb, mind blowing moment. I really credit her for sort of what I call now, edutainment. You know what I'm saying—taking education and entertainment and blending them together. That turned into my style of music today.

So hip-hop culture in general is really just a way of life. It includes music, dance, fashion—those kinds of things. But rap music is the soundtrack of this subculture within the American culture. Rap just stands for "rhythm and poetry." When I became, I guess, around sixteen, when I took my faith more seriously, I realized that I shouldn't probably rap about the same things that I was normally rapping about because it conflicts with a Christian worldview. I wanted to make sure anything I put out there represented who I was as a Christian.

So I thought about that. I thought about Christian rap, something that I had been exposed to as a kid when some church sent out a cassette to our church, and it was, like, Christian rap, but it was, like, not good. But I was able to refer to it, you know, and remember that it existed. So I checked to see if that Christian rap thing was still around. And it was, and I felt like I had found my home. Now, in short, I'm giving myself to using the same artistic expression, which is being very black and white in

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your face: This is what I believe. Take it or leave it, which is something hip-hop listeners expect and come to appreciate. They typically value that bold honesty and transparency. But they also respect good art.

So I try to keep those two in balance: good art with an honest, transparent message. Even non-Christian listeners will at least give you an ear. So that's what I aim to do—be up front and honest about my Christianity. This is what I think, this is what I believe. Here it is, over music and rhyme and cadence. And, yeah, that's carried me to this point. And people mostly find it to be useful even outside of Christianity. But inside the faith, I think the Church has come around to seeing it as a tool to reach new Christians and rap listeners.

James Marriott: That's fantastic. I love the "edutainment" term, and it strikes me that your work and artistry is right in line with Luther's work writing hymns in the Reformation. They're all very didactic, intended to teach the faith. And I think Luther would resonate with the idea of edutainment, utilizing musical idioms of the day and teaching the faith through them.

FLAME: Yeah, the cool thing about rap is that the format does lend itself to cadence and repetition. So you can really get it down to memory. Most often, a song is about two and a half to three minutes. So especially in a culture where education may not have been overwhelmingly highlighted, where a person has, you know, eighth grade or high school level understanding, you can hit them with things in music that they may not have had the opportunity to learn. I think that in the ancient world, most people weren't educated. They didn't have a Bible, and they probably didn't even know how to read. But it was music that helped them learn.

James Marriott: Well, and that even gets to the cultural assumptions of what an education is, you know. Education itself has been formalized and normalized with a particular cultural bent to it. Just because someone can't read doesn't mean that they aren't educated in some way, you know. It frames our different perspectives.

FLAME: For sure. That's a helpful, helpful distinction. I love it. Yeah.

James Marriott: Tell me then, what do you do when you encounter people who say that hip-hop doesn't really belong with the Gospel? This kind of thing has happened in every generation—opera doesn't really belong with the Gospel. Rock and Roll doesn't really belong with the Gospel. And organ music, actually, wasn't native to the church. What's your reaction when you encounter the argument that hip-hop and the Gospel, as an intersection of faith and culture, just doesn't fit?

FLAME: There is definitely a negative expression in some rap music. So, it makes sense, if you see a thing wreaking havoc in the community and society, it is sort of frightening. It makes me think about Saul's conversion. Before he was Paul, as we know him now, he was a frightening guy. And when he comes around and is now proclaiming the Christian message, it is confusing and puts people in this

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juxtaposition. So I think that's a natural reflex, and I always try to give space for that natural reflex, because I know it's coming, you know.

But then, after people at least give you an ear to hear you out, then you can explain to them those distinctions. Help them understand that music is just this cool thing God created where sounds collide and makes sense together. Words blend together and communicate clear thought. It's a gift from God that's inherently innocent because He gave it to us that way. Now you can take it and stuff it with all kinds of bad things, and make it poisonous to a community or to society, but rap is no different. It's a neutral genre of music that could either go left or right, good or bad.

So once people sort of relax that reflex and hear that, and they know that it stems from God's creation in terms of music and sound and rhyming words and cohesive thought, and then Scripture Gospel theology, then they say, "Man, I've never considered it being packaged this way." And that helps them typically relax that resistance. So I ask people to remember that God is the origin of music and sound, and if we take it and use it as a teaching tool, then it could be a friend of the Gospel as opposed to competing with the Gospel.

James Marriott: Yeah, that's cool. And, actually, I've tried to wrestle through this with Christian music in worship, with different musical genres being used in different churches. And you just reframed something for me. You acknowledged that rap isn't neutral, you know, that it does have cultural affiliations that people project on it. So it's not neutral in that sense. It has cultural assumptions that go with it from different people in different times, but your point is that music itself *does* have a kind of neutrality in that it doesn't inherently espouse any of those assumptions, even if those assumptions are projected on it.

And so, when we know that a particular genre of music is used for Gospel work, it can be affiliated very successfully with Gospel proclamation, because the assumptions that are made about it are then reframed and redeemed. I never quite thought about it in that way. Thanks for that!

FLAME: Yeah, for sure. I love that because I think what we do over time, too, even as Christians, is we esteem a certain thing, like a certain style of music, as being the heavenly one or the Christianly one, as if God handed down a genre and says, "This is the one that I'm used to my angel singing. Now I'm gifting you with it." Instead, we all just have our different ways of assigning some genre to that concept, you know, whether it's hymns, rap, gospel, contemporary Christian music. We all have our favorite thing. But in many ways, they all have the same origin story as you mentioned. I mean, I think the Blues has some influence on gospel music. I think I heard somewhere along the way that Luther was influenced by some cultural sounds and made him kind of morph out of that.

So I think all of our genres have natural touch points with society. Language is like this, too. I mean, if I would use this terminology from the surrounding culture, words that we might think are, like, sacred and dropped out of heaven. But they are

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really terms and ideas that the surrounding culture normally thought in or talked in. So I think it is important to remember that inherently God says that His creation is good. There is an innocence to everything until it's sort of taken in one direction or the other, you know?

James Marriott: Is there anything else you want to say about your other artistic or academic contributions? You're a writer. You present, you speak at conferences, you're teaching and leading people in various ways. How does the confluence of faith and culture inform not just your musical artistry, but also your teaching and writing?

FLAME: Yeah, it's so fun to see all the different elements play their individual role. Like, for example, now that I'm an author (that's so funny to say now). But the cool thing is it provides a bit more freedom than the music. The music has natural barriers in terms of there's a time restraint. The sound palette restricts the mood and the emotion. So I'm very constrained to either a happy song or a sad song. And you don't want to skip moods because the song won't feel right, you know, in a pragmatic way.

So I think now in being an author, there's a lot more freedom. I can write a lot more and sort of be more nuanced. You don't get my St. Louis Hood accent, so you can just read a word plainly without those kind of regional barriers for me. Man, I love it. When I perform in a place like Africa, they will be like, "what is that word you said," and I have to explain the word in its context. In writing, some of that is removed, and there is a freedom there.

But I think, overall, the way I look at this sort of intersection between, you know, theology and these different ways of getting it out there—I heard an analogy that I think is helpful. Let's just say there is an outbreak of pestilence, or a pandemic if you will. There's a virus and, you know, there's a panic to help people. Let's just help people, because people are coughing and they can't breathe, and they have headaches and dizziness and fevers. It is necessary to be on the ground helping.

But you also need the scientists in a lab who are very technical and meticulous with chemicals and mixing them together and making sure this amount is just right, helping to make an antidote or vaccine. You need both people on deck. You need the scientists in the lab, carefully working through all the chemistry so that they can provide the best combination of elements to help the people in the way that they do. Then you need people to take those vaccines and apply the shots to the people on the ground.

I see my role as sort of being in a lab in many ways. I need to be in a lab. I need to care about church history. I need to care about doctrine and nuance, because when you go and minister this vaccine to the public, if they don't understand that Jesus is both fully man and fully God, and they just think He was a prophet, they're not putting their faith in a person that's going to help them. That's not going to save them. He has nothing for them because he's just a cool guy with some cool ideas that can make you feel better for a few days. But eternally you'll just say, "Oh, sorry."

So I like to think caring for theology is important because I'm in the lab doing that work. And then the cool thing is I get to sort of step out of that character and then

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apply the medicine myself when I write the songs and perform them in this palatable way. I get to kind of play both roles, and I think they're all important.

James Marriott: I think it's great. The way that you articulate the different roles and perspective of that is really helpful, and it affirms that both are theology. Both are doing theology! Your artistry of performing is just as theological as your artistry of being in the lab studying the history and nuancing the text. Both are the contribution that you make to the Church and the world.

That's something that I always try to advocate for with artists is that the art itself is theology. We're making a Gospel expression, a theological expression, through and in art itself. We are all theologians.

FLAME: Right, we are always gathering information that relates to the things that the theologian cares about. They may just gather from a popular movie, or just a common sort of stream of thought flowing through society. But everybody's thinking about debt. Everybody's thinking about God, or some type of divine essence. Everybody's thinking about guilt. Everybody's thinking about shame. They care about those issues. So it's a conversation that never ends in a human psyche. We're always doing a sort of theology, even bad theology, if you don't have it rightly oriented. But every second of everyday people are doing it.

James Marriott: What is your hope for the Church's engagement of your work? You're making all these different contributions in different ways. What do you hope the Church does with that?

FLAME: Yeah. One, I want people in the Church in general to see the relevance of what's taking place. Because most people don't. Most people don't think deeply about things. We're all busy. We all have lives and families, and we're trying to make it through the day in a simple way. So intellectually, people may put barriers up as it relates to thinking about God and Christianity and forgiveness of sin.

But most people will allow time for entertainment and using their imagination. They'll go to a movie. They'll listen to a song. They'll go check out a concert. They'll make room for that amongst their busy schedules. What I want the Church to understand is this is a way to enter people's lives, the busyness of it and the mundane experience of it. We enter their lives with the things that are most important, as it relates to Scripture, theology, and faith. We can find a way to meet people. Where they naturally camp out, we could show up with hope and good news and Gospel.

We enter their lives with the things that are most important, as it relates to Scripture, theology, and faith.

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So that's why I would like to think that eventually, even in a Lutheran space, we would say, "Oh, my goodness, this is a great contribution. How can we even help start this up in our local churches, where we develop more Christian rap artists, more Christian rap, or people that make film and dance?" Let's make this a designated space and give attention and budget to it so that we can infiltrate mainstream society with good ideas, beautiful ideas that reflect the Christian worldview, and then, even more potently, ones that bring up the Gospel conversation.

People will get caught up by it and say, "Oh, wow! I didn't even know I was thinking deeply about matters of faith and Christianity. Just because it was done so well, it sounded so good." And now I'm engaging my emotions and my mind at the same time with the beautiful reality that God loves us. He cares for us, and He demonstrated that through His Son Jesus Christ, and delivers it, the Word and Sacrament. So that's why I want people to see the relevance in it and start to mobilize people—to be Lutheran out loud in the arts.

James Marriott: Oh, that's fantastic! I love that. Thanks so much for taking the time with us here today and for sharing your insight on the intersection of faith and culture in your life and artistry.

Editor's note: For more about FLAME, I encourage you to read his new book Extra Nos: Discovering Grace Outside Myself (Concordia Publishing House, 2023).

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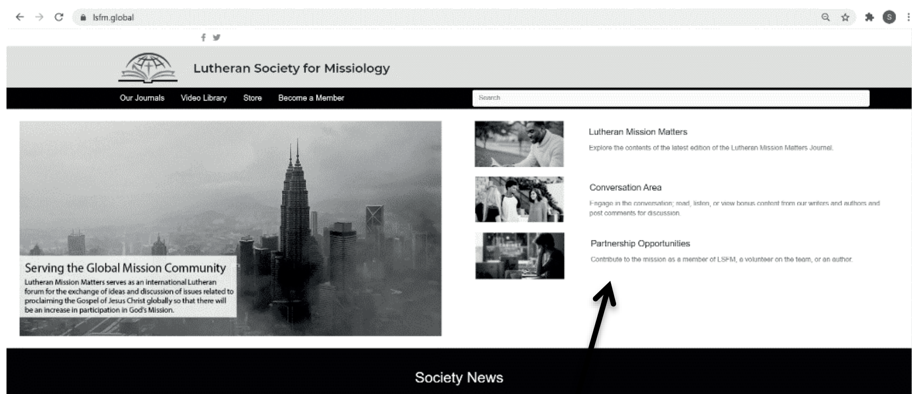

Be sure to check out the upcoming issue’s Call for Papers (including the theme) and Submission Guidelines near the end of this edition or online (https://lsfm.global) under Partnership Opportunities.

Call for Papers

The editorial committee of *Lutheran Mission Matters (LMM),* formerly *Missio Apostolica,* invites you to submit an article for the Spring 2024 issue on the chosen theme, "*The Church's Mission? The Mission's Church?*"

One might think after two thousand years of participation in and pious reflection upon the Mission of God (*missio Dei*) we, the members of our Lord's Church, would fully understand the relationship between the mission and the church. Yet questions still abound: What is the Mission of God? What is the church's role in it? Is it God's mission, the church's mission, or both?

On the question of how "church" and "mission" are connected, Christopher Wright has noted that "it is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world, as that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission—God's mission." Both church and mission belong to God, and yet a variety of missional paradigms or models have developed that can differ quite substantially from each other. Should "mission" remain distinct and independent of the "church," as the structure of many para-church mission organizations suggests? Or should the church exercise ownership and control over "mission" activities? And if "mission" is necessarily within the responsibility of the "church," should the locus of that responsibility be local and congregational or denominational and institutional, or with some other structure of the church? What about more or less *ad hoc* associations of churches such as mission societies, which may or may not be defined along denominational lines? Who has authority to send and oversee mission workers? Clearly, significant questions remain even if we agree that "mission" and "church" belong together. What can Lutheran Christians say to such questions? Divergent conceptions of the relationship between church and mission can be seen throughout the church's history and are not easily identified with denominational or confessional membership.

This discussion may not remain theoretical, because intrinsic to missions is action—the sending of God's Son, Jesus, and through Him, His Church, into the world. Our conversation, therefore, requires a "what does this mean" in terms of the practical working out of God's mission in the everyday life of His people. When and where does God's mission take place? How and by whom does it proceed into the world? To what extent is "mission" a shared vocation of all the baptized, and to what extent are the activities of "mission" entrusted uniquely to those regularly called to public ministry (i.e., to ordained clergy)?

Lutheran Mission Matters invites you to share your thoughts and insights regarding such questions. We are especially hoping to receive substantive contributions from parish pastors and other mission practitioners. Articles are

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generally about 3,000 words; however, shorter or longer articles will be considered. *LMM* is a peer-reviewed journal, published twice yearly by the Lutheran Society for Missiology (LSFM). LSFM was founded almost thirty years ago with the purpose of providing a Lutheran perspective in the theological and practical working out of Christ's mission to and in the world. Our publication is indexed in the ATLA Religion Database on the EBSCO platform, along with the full text of the articles. *LMM* articles are available also under the "Publications" tab on the Society's web page at www.lsfm.global.

Submission Guidelines

We welcome your participation in writing for *Lutheran Mission Matters*. Please observe the following guidelines for submission of manuscripts.

Lutheran Mission Matters publishes studies of missiological issues under discussion in Christian circles across the world. Exegetical, biblical, theological, historical, and practical dimensions of the apostolic mission of the church are explored in these pages. (See the mission statement below.) While issues often focus on a theme, the editorial committee encourages and appreciates submissions of articles on any missiological topic.

Contributors can familiarize themselves with previous issues of *Missio Apostolica* and *Lutheran Mission Matters* at the Lutheran Society for Missiology's website (https://lsfm.global). Click on Our Journals to view PDFs of previous issues.

Book reviews: LSFM also welcomes book reviews. Submit reviews of no more than 500 words. E-mail Dr. Joel Okamoto (bookreviews@lsfm.global) if interested in writing a review.

Mission Statement

Lutheran Mission Matters serves as an international Lutheran forum for the exchange of ideas and discussion of issues related to proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ globally.

Formatting and Style

Please consult and use *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th edition for endnotes. See basic examples below and/or consult the "Chicago-Style Citation Quick Guide" (http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html).

[1] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 243–255.

[2] Hans Küng, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*, trans. Edwin Quinn (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 184–186.

[3] Robert J. Priest, Terry Dischinger, et al., "Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement," *Missiology, An International Review* 34 (2006): 431–450.

References to Luther's works must identify the original document and the year of its publication. Please use the following model.

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[4] Martin Luther, Ninety-five Theses (1517) in *Luther's Works*, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 31:17–34.

Quotations of or allusions to specific texts in the Lutheran Confessional writings must be documented. The use of modern translations of the *Book of Concord* is encouraged. Please use the following model.

[5] Augsburg Confession V (Concerning the Office of Preaching) in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran* Church, ed. R. Kolb, T. J. Wengert, C. P. Arand (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 40.

Direct quotations exceeding four manuscript lines should be set off from the text in an indented paragraph, without quotation marks. Omissions in a quotation should be noted by ellipsis, with an additional period to end a sentence, as appropriate.

Spelling should follow the latest edition of *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. Words in languages other than English should be italicized.

Preparation and Submission

Length: Concise, clear articles are preferred. Manuscripts should not be more than 3,000–4,000 words although longer pieces may be arranged by the editor.

Content: *Lutheran Mission Matters* is committed to addressing the academic community as well as pastors and people throughout the church and involving them in the theology and practice of mission. Use of terms or phrases in languages other than the language of the article itself is discouraged. The use of complex and long sentences is discouraged. Attention should be paid to paragraphing so that the article is easy to follow and appears inviting on the page.

Use of call-outs: *Lutheran Mission Matters* frequently uses call-outs to break up blocks of text on a page and to emphasize important points being made in the article. The author is invited to use Word's Text Highlight Color to suggest words or phrase that may be included in a call-out. The final decision will be made by the editor.

Format: Please submit articles in single spaced Times New Roman 10-point font with 0.25" paragraph indents.

Submission: Manuscripts should be submitted electronically to Professor Victor Raj, editor@lsfm.global. Submission of a manuscript assumes that all material has been carefully read and properly noted and attributed. The author thereby assumes responsibility for any necessary legal permission for materials cited in the article. Articles that are inadequately documented will be returned for complete documentation. If the article has been previously published or presented in a public forum, please inform the editor at the time the article is submitted.

Review: The editors submit every manuscript to the editorial committee for examination and critique. Decisions are reached by consensus within the committee. Authors may expect a decision normally within three months of submission. Before publication, articles are copy edited for style and clarity, as necessary. Major alterations will be made available to the author for review.

Additional Submission Information

Bio: Authors should provide, along with their submissions, an autobiographical description. Please write 2–3 sentences introducing yourself. Please include your title(s) you would like LMM to use, the form of your name you want to be known as. Tell your present position and/or your education or experience that qualifies you to write the article. If you have a head-shot photo that you would like to provide, we will try to use it. Please provide the email address at which a respondent could reach you.

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