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# concordia Journal

A Concordia Seminary St. Louis Publication





Editorials

*The 500th Anniversary  
of the Reformation* 07  
Charles Arand

*From the President of  
Concordia University, Nebraska* 11  
Brian L. Friedrich

*Low Seminary Enrollments* 12  
Dale A. Meyer

Articles

*The Scientist as  
a Theologian of the Cross* 17  
Charles Arand

*Science, Religion,  
and God's Two Kingdoms* 36  
Russell Moulds

*Modern Science, Contemporary  
Culture, and Christian Theology* 45  
Joel Okamoto

*The Age of the Earth and  
Confessional Lutheranism* 64  
John Jurchen

*Concordia Seminary and  
the Science for Seminaries Grant* 75  
Charles Arand and Joel Okamoto

*A Lutheran Voice in Science* 82  
S. Joshua Swamidass

Homiletical  
Helps

*LSB Series A—Epistles* 91

Reviews

117

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# *Editorials*



# The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation

## Lutherans & Science

I suspect that most people don't associate the Reformation with a recovery of the doctrine of creation. They think primarily of Luther's recovery of the gospel; we are justified by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith alone. And rightly so. But what is the gospel other than a restoration of human creatures to their creator and with that, to his creation (which had been turned against them as well)?

But as Luther explored the ramifications of the gospel during the 1520s, we can see him grow in his appreciation for God's creation (see his treatment of the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer).<sup>1</sup> In fact, this appreciation continues throughout his career culminating in his magisterial lectures on Genesis at the end of his life.

For Luther, to confess Jesus as Lord is to confess him as our Redeemer and as our Creator. Creation and redemption belong together. Creation informs redemption, and redemption is nothing other than the redemption of creation. And so Luther writes,

Now if I believe in God's Son and bear in mind that He became man, all creatures will appear a hundred times more beautiful to me than before. Then I will properly appreciate the sun, the moon, the stars, trees, apples, pears, as I reflect that He is Lord over and the center of all things.<sup>2</sup>

By returning us to the Creator, the gospel returns us to his creation.<sup>3</sup> In the gospel, we no longer see the Creator as the terrorizing God of thunderstorms and "rustling leaves"; he is the God who lavishes his goodness upon the world . . . in spite of the sin, evil, and death we daily encounter.

### ***Theological Engagement with Science***

A decade ago, the Harvard evolutionary sociobiologist, E. O. Wilson, wrote in his book, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*, that religion and science are the two greatest forces for shaping hearts and minds today. Science's incredible success at understanding our world and improving our lives through technology has given it an authority without peer today. As theologians and pastors, we need to engage science in its many facets for several reasons.

First, the gospel restores us to creation. As Lutherans, we confess that God has given us our bodies and souls. Our bodies include eyes, ears, and all its members. We are made from the earth for life on the earth. We are truly earth creatures. Our bodies are created for the gravity of the earth and depend upon the conditions on earth for life. If we want to go the moon or Mars we have to take part of the earth with

us. Our soul encompasses “reason and all [our] senses.” This includes intelligence, imagination, logic, and aesthetics. Our senses are the ways by which we engage the physical creation.

Second, our exploration of the world finds expression in thanks and praise to God for his wisdom and goodness. Science is one way (along with the arts) we utilize these creaturely gifts to explore and study God’s world. In the process, our wonder increases not only for the world, but also for the one who made it. Consider the first photo ever taken of the earth from outside the earth, *Earthrise*. Consider the *Blue Marble*, an image made by the Apollo 17 crew, and the *Pale Blue Dot*, a photo taken by Voyager 1 as the spacecraft flew past Saturn. Think of the many stunning photos from the Hubble Space Telescope. Such wonder for Christians finds expression in thanks and praise to our Creator.

Third, we explore and study the world so that we might use it as God intended, not as idols, but to the flourishing of his human creatures and his entire creation. Yet in our exploration of the world, science continues to raise theological and ethical questions that it cannot answer. One of the biggest questions that we face in the decades ahead is, “What does it mean to be human?” Biologists tell us that our bodies are actually living ecosystems consisting of many microbiomes (<http://www.aaas.org/news/human-microbiome-implications-microcosm-within-us>). What does that mean for our understanding of self when the self is no longer “one” entity? *National Geographic* explored the issue of whether our future lies in being human or machine.<sup>4</sup> Are we primarily a consciousness and our bodies little more than containers? And neuroscience raises new and interesting questions about the nature of consciousness and the soul. And so we serve and obey.

As a faculty, we are engaging others to acquaint us with the latest and best of scientific inquiry. Only with a firm understanding of scientific research are we able to explore the implications and questions it raises. It does us no good to claim that something is not “real science.” Nor does it help us to describe the science inaccurately so that it becomes a caricature. To do so risks making our biblical teaching and gospel proclamation hollow and easily dismissible as mere fantasy. We can engage scientists in our congregations; let them share with us what they are doing and where things are going. More often than not, they are delighted to share their work.

Finally, and most importantly, we need a robust theology of creation. Our attention often turns to perceived threats from outside the church . . . especially from militantly anti-Christian atheists who dismiss the existence of God based upon science. But we often fail to see that we ourselves often live as if God does not exist because we can account for the workings of the world without reference to God (weather, food production, and so on). Our theology of creation has too often been truncated to a question of origins to the neglect of God’s ongoing work in creation (*creatio continua*).

In such a theology of creation, we need to recognize, as William Weinrich observed

a number of years ago, that the Christian confession that God created all things *ex nihilo* is about the character of God and how God relates to the world at *all times and in all places*. Similarly, it is also about our nature as creatures and how we relate to God and to his creation at *all times and in all places*.<sup>5</sup> And how do we deal with accounts that can explain the world's working without reference to God and at the same time confess that God is constantly working "in, with and under his creation"?

A doctrine of creation provides us with theological language for speaking of the world that is different from secular ways of speaking. This is important theologically and practically, for as Norman Wirzba writes, "The way we name and narrate the world determines how we are going to live within it."<sup>6</sup> We need a grammar that speaks of God as the Creator, of us as his beloved creatures among his other creatures, and this world as his good creation. Apart from such language, one cannot speak of accountability or give thanks to God. Such language can avoid dualistic ways of thinking about redemption, in which our "souls" are saved but we have nothing to say about our "bodies." For "underlying Luther's soteriological schema is a doctrine of creation," that orients his language of salvation.<sup>7</sup>

Along the way, we need a theological approach to science that includes humility when it comes to interpreting the Bible in absolute terms about what must or must not be in the world. Once upon a time, most Christians argued from God's providence and the perfection of his creation that extinction of a species was impossible (*Nature's Ghosts* by Mark V. Barrow). In recent years, some have used similar "theological arguments" from Genesis 9 against the possibility of anthropogenic climate change. In the past decade, thousands of exoplanets have been discovered. Some might argue theologically that life can only exist on Earth, and so will never be found on other planets. How would we respond if elementary life were discovered on another planet? Would it raise some challenging questions?

Over a year ago, Dr. Russ Moulds of Concordia Nebraska approached Concordia Seminary about doing a partner issue on faith and science (in light of our reception of a Science for Seminaries Grant). And so in this issue, we have four articles, two each by faculty from Concordia University (Russ Moulds and Jon Jurchen) and Concordia Seminary (Charles Arand and Joel Okamoto). We conclude the issue with an overview on how we used the American Association for the Advancement of Science grant along with reflections from our science advisor associated for the grant, S. Joshua Swamidass.

We hope that this issue of the *Concordia Journal* will serve as a complement to the very fine CTCR document *The Natural Knowledge of God in Christian Confession and Witness* (2013) and the earlier *Together with All Creatures: Caring for God's Living Earth* (2010). That these are issues of some import also was highlighted by the March 2017 issue of *Lutheran Witness*, which was devoted to the subject of science and faith.

The Lutheran theology that arose in the sixteenth century did not retreat from the world or culture into its own echo chamber. It engaged both critically and

constructively the best and latest that science had uncovered. We hope to follow in their steps.

*Charles Arand*  
*Dean, Theological Research and Publications*

### **Endnotes**

- 1 See Paul W. Robinson, "Luther's Explanation of Daily Bread in Light of Medieval Preaching," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13, (1999): 435–447.
- 2 Martin Luther, Sermons on the Gospel of John (chaps 1–3), vol. 22, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 496.
- 3 Bayer speaks of a "conversion to the world, a turning toward the creature," *Martin Luther's Theology*, 107.
- 4 Josh Fischman, "Merging Man and Machine: The Bionic Age," *National Geographic* 217 (January 2010): 34–53.
- 5 William Weinrich, "*Creatio ex nihilo*," unpublished paper, [n.d.], 6.
- 6 Norman Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation (the Church and Postmodern Culture): A Christian Vision or Understanding and Loving Our World* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2015). Kindle, Chapter 1. Wirzba refers to this as "The Grammar of a Christian World."
- 7 Jon Mackenzie, "Luther's Topology: *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and the Cultivation of the Concept of Place in Martin Luther's Theology" *Modern Theology* 29 (April 2013): 93.

# From the President of Concordia University, Nebraska

Since its founding in 1894, Concordia University, Nebraska has faithfully prepared men and women to serve in the vocations to which God has called them. For our first seven decades, this was almost exclusively to serve in parishes and parochial schools, one of the great legacies of our beloved Synod. Since the 1970s, however, our academic programs have expanded and now include over seventy undergraduate majors here in Seward and nearly thirty graduate programs delivered on ground and online, enabling us to serve students around the world. Today, you are as likely to encounter a biology or business major on our undergraduate campus, as you are an education major.

Despite the expansion of our academic offerings, we continue to serve the church faithfully. Each year, Concordia University, Nebraska places more workers in the fulltime ministries of Synod than any other Concordia University System college or university. In fact, one of every five rostered workers of Synod today holds a degree from Concordia.

Even more than our preparation of workers for the church, however, what has not changed over the past 123 years is our clear, winsome witness to Jesus Christ, the one and only Savior of the world. Built on the Truth, our nationally recognized, academically excellent education is provided by invested faculty and staff who serve as mentors and models of faith in this Christ-centered, caring community. In an age when too many faith-based institutions downplay their faith, Concordia University, Nebraska boldly proclaims and lives it.

Perhaps there is no area in academia today where the need for bold proclamation and witness is needed more than in the intersection of faith and science. These two areas are often positioned antithetically, or at least are perceived that way. At Concordia University, Nebraska, we believe Holy Scripture perfectly reveals the supremacy of Christ over all creation (Col 1:15) while science, imperfectly at best, helps us realize in another way the brilliance of the Creator and gives insight into the world God created, through which we catch a limited and fleeting glimpse of his might and majesty. It is my prayer that the essays and articles that follow will cause you to praise the God of all creation and ponder humankind's finite limitations to investigate, study, and explain the wonders of the world around us.

*Brian L. Friedrich  
President  
Concordia University, Nebraska*

# Low Seminary Enrollments

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has a shortage of pastors. For some years now, the Council of Presidents has not been able to fill calls for new pastors from the seminaries because there have not been enough graduates from Master of Divinity programs to meet the needs. The consequences of this shortage are serious to the life of the Synod in many ways, especially because the shortage of pastors jeopardizes faithful pastoral care to people and thereby diminishes vitality and growth in congregations without a pastor. At the outset it must be said that this is more than an LCMS challenge. Of seminaries accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), 55 percent report low MDiv enrollments. The reasons for the decline are complex and known. How we turn this around and seize opportunities for growth is less appreciated. Unless we see this contextually, we may indeed increase enrollments but only temporarily. Without a larger contextual vision, our memberships could continue to decline, resulting in diminished LCMS ministry presence in communities of twenty-first-century America. I suggest we recast how we think about the seminaries' enrollment problem.

It is one-dimensional to say we need more students. To express that need in fuller contour, I suggest we understand our challenge to be recruiting the next generation of pastors who will lead congregations in the dramatically different twenty-first century. The differences between the American culture in which my home congregation formed me and the coming environment for congregations are amazing. One cultural change among many: Today “most American adults agree that it is a good idea to live with one’s significant other before getting married and most adults either currently or have previously lived with their boyfriend/girlfriend.” Another change: “There is growing acceptance of porn, particularly among young Americans.”<sup>1</sup> As overwhelming is technological change. Ray Kurzweil of Google says, “The twenty-first century will be equivalent to 20,000 years of progress at today’s rate of progress.”<sup>2</sup> Thomas Friedman describes the impact all this change is having on us. “The rate of technological change is now accelerating so fast that it has risen above the average rate at which most people can absorb all these changes. Many of us cannot keep pace anymore. ‘And that is causing us cultural angst’ (Erik Teller).”<sup>3</sup> Congregational angst too. We have lost our privileged place in society. The biblical illiteracy prevalent in American society shows itself in our church members. The “nones” are increasing. Regular worship attendance is now assumed to be once every few months, not every Sunday. You can add to that list, reasons why the future looks so daunting, but consider this. Many of this year’s graduates from Concordia Seminary were eleven-

years-old when 9-11 happened. The losses in church life that my generation grieves are not known to tomorrow's future pastors. Our seminarians are Christ-centered, Bible-based, and want to serve and grow the congregations they will be privileged to serve. When a donor asked me, "What's the Seminary doing about millennials?" I first did not know what to say, but I recovered and said, "Our students are millennials. They'll figure out how to minister to their peers." I believe that is true. Our role, yours and mine, is to mentor them in the unchanging truths of God's word so that they will take those truths into the changing world of their coming ministries. The Lord of the church is raising up the next generations of pastors to lead in the challenging times ahead. Please help us recruit the winsome personalities, the keen intellects, and the lovers of Jesus and the Bible for the future.

The essence of congregational life, gathering to hear the Shepherd's voice, will not change.<sup>4</sup> What will change, more than I can imagine, is how the effective pastor leads a differently conditioned laity. The LCMS congregations we have known were set in America's manufacturing economy. Now we are in an information economy. Faith is information intensive, *fides quae*. People working at the plant could bring their questions to church on Sunday. In an information economy, they will want to find their faith answer immediately. Interactive on-line Bible studies will complement the Bible class at church. Congregations will send out their own daily devotions. Some pastors already take tweets during their sermon (how they do that is beyond me!). And in an information context, the priesthood of all believers will assume a more integral role in the life and leadership of the congregation. The laity can access theological information and can theoretically learn all the theology they want. From what providers will they learn? From their pastor, congregation, seminaries and synod, or from some less trusted source? What will all that ready theological knowledge to a connected and committed laity mean for the leadership role of the local congregational pastor? No longer simply the "answer man," he will be equipping the saints like never before, in ways like never before, all because of the digital information revolution. What will result in the new contours of faithful participation in congregational life is a clearer understanding that we are in this church because we follow Jesus—faith. Worshipers knew that decades ago, but it wasn't as clear because we lived in "Christian" America. Faith in Jesus, true as it was, was homogenized with "Christian" cultural America. By the way, what about the financial cost for what is to come? With information technology, we can accomplish more with fewer employees and less money. Doable!

I mentioned that 55 percent of ATS seminaries are struggling with low enrollments. These ATS seminaries, some 270 schools, come in all shapes and sizes: denominational seminaries, freestanding seminaries, and divinity schools embedded in universities. Some have gone totally online; others are both residential and online. They graduate social workers, professors, theologically minded laypeople, and pastors. Of all these differences in ATS seminaries, the two seminaries of the LCMS are almost

unique. Our MDiv programs produce pastors, period. We serve one denomination, period. There are seminaries that serve over 100 denominations. Imagine that! Where do they go to turn around an enrollment shortage? Concordia Seminary and Concordia Theological Seminary know precisely where to go, to you and the people of our church. Together we can recruit the pastors to lead our congregations long after you and I have been taken to heaven. If we don't do this, congregations without pastors will languish and, most sadly, people will wander away from the Savior without an under-shepherd to seek them out. We can look at this simply as a shortage; the glass half-empty. In fact, the shortage is a symptom of our current transition to a new twenty-first-century context for congregational life. In all the unknowns of what is to come, tomorrow's pastors will lead coming generations into ever-clearer understandings of faith and ministry. Thank you for partnering with us.

*Dale A. Meyer*  
*President*

### **Endnotes**

- 1 Barna Group, *Barna Trends 2017* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 101, 87.
- 2 Thomas Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 187.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 4 Smalcald Articles, III, 12.

# *Articles*



# The Scientist as a Theologian of the Cross

Charles P. Arand



Charles P. Arand is the Eugene E. and Nell S. Fincke Graduate Professor of Theology, director of the Center for the Care of Creation, and dean of theological research and publication at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, Missouri.

Susan walks into your office during semester break. She has just completed a fascinating undergraduate course in astronomy. She's always been interested in math and science and so now she is thinking about pursuing a career in science, perhaps astronomy or cosmology. But

she also finds herself conflicted by those aspects of science that appear to contradict what she has been taught by her pastor and congregation. Fortunately, you have cultivated a relationship with the young adults in your congregation that allows her to open up and share with you her questions and concerns. What kind of a conversation ensues?

Much is potentially at stake in the conversation with Susan. Recent research has shown that one of the primary reasons why many young people have left the church has to do with the conflict between science and their faith. David Kinnamon's book, *You Lost Me*, shows how important these issues are for millennials and how they struggle with them.<sup>1</sup> They are anxious to know how they can square what they learn in science with what they have learned from their pastors.<sup>2</sup> And so this becomes a potentially high stakes conversation.

If most pastors are like me, I suspect they are nowhere close to being any kind of authority on any field of science. With rare exceptions, our knowledge of scientific matters is probably quite superficial. We may have read a few books or articles on quantum physics, or we may consider ourselves amateur ornithologists, but most of us are unfamiliar with the intricacies and the details of any contemporary scientific field. This holds true for all the sciences, including astronomy and cosmology (Susan's

interest), and for that matter, the current state of the science when it comes to issues about the big bang, the geological age of the earth, the expansion of the universe, or biological evolution with regard to genetics.

So if we are going to address science on the basis of science, we had better know the best and the latest science otherwise we will lose our credibility when students or others discover that we really do not know what we are talking about. Furthermore, we should be careful to distinguish science from scientism, the former being the disciplines practiced by professional scientists and the latter being a worldview in which the limits of science are ignored by those who believe that science offers us a complete account of the world.<sup>3</sup>

So how do we approach the conversation as pastor-theologians? I will argue that we begin by working out from the center of our faith. We get our bearings by re-centering ourselves in that which makes us Christians. And that means that we begin where we find Jesus, namely, “in crib and cross—and in the crypt he left behind.”<sup>4</sup> For that reason, I propose Luther’s theology of the cross as a way of helping our people—and ourselves—to think through issues of faith and science.

### ***A View from the Cross***

Luther first formulated his theology of the cross in a series of theses that he penned in 1518 as an account of his theology as requested by his Augustinian superiors in Heidelberg.<sup>5</sup> Less than a year earlier, he had posted his ninety-five theses for debate on the question of indulgences. Now Luther sets forth a series of theses on the issue of justification. He does not deal with that topic in isolation, instead, he sees that the position one takes on justification is indicative of a larger methodological approach to all of theology.

In these theses, Luther identifies two approaches to theology, a theology of the cross versus a theology of [human] glory. Luther contrasts a scholastic theology (shaped by philosophy) that glories in human abilities and capacities with a theology of the cross that trusts the crucified and risen Lord. “Luther believed that the best view of all reality was to be had from the foot of the cross on Calvary. The death and resurrection of Christ parted the clouds, and he could see God and himself clearly.”<sup>6</sup> Together, they “disclose in the most decisive way possible what it means for God to be God and what it means for us to be humans.”<sup>7</sup>

The theology of the cross thus provided a way of thinking and a method of practicing theology that Luther continued to draw on for different situations and purposes throughout his life. Indeed, for Luther, “theology is always hermeneutical, an interpretation of God’s dealings in the world by individuals from within the world.”<sup>8</sup> Robert Kolb notes that a theologian of the cross thus “employs the cross of Christ as the focal point and fulcrum for understanding and presenting a wide range of specific topics within the biblical message.”<sup>9</sup>

Luther’s theology of the cross can serve as a helpful tool by which Christians

who are scientists can think theologically about their vocations because it addresses the question of how we know God and learn about his world. To that end, we will first focus on how the theology of the cross orients us to the promise and the faith it elicits. Herein lies our confidence and certainty. Then we will explore how the theology of the cross orients us to the world and gives us freedom to explore that world and live with the provisional knowledge we learn from it.

### ***The Cross and the Creator***

We might open our conversation with Susan by asking what is it that makes us Christian. Are we Christians because we oppose evolution or abortion or same-sex marriage? No. We are Christians because we bear his name. At the heart of our faith lies the confession of God's love for us as manifested in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In one of the earliest Christian letters, Paul speaks plainly, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3–4).

This event and the promise of new life that flows from it forms the basis for our confidence and our faith. If the Son of God had not manifested his love for us by dying for us when we were most unlovable (Rom 5) and if he had not opened up a new and eternal life for us by rising from the dead, our faith would be pointless (1 Cor 15:17).

### **The Scandal and Creative Love of the Cross**

Already here, at the very center of our faith, we find ourselves at odds with human epistemological standards and expectations for God. Most people, if they were God, would not come to earth, suffer, and die. Peter Berger expresses this scandal of the cross well in contemporary terms.

Paul's "word of the cross," of course, is the core of the Gospel: that God came into the world in the improbable figure of a small-town carpenter turned into itinerant preacher, who was executed as a criminal, despised and abandoned, who was dead and buried—and who then, in a moment that transformed the whole structure of reality, rose from the dead to become the mightiest power in the universe and lord over all human destinies.<sup>10</sup>

Paul knew that many in his day considered this story nonsensical. To make his point, Paul contrasted the foolishness of the cross with the demand by Jews for empirical evidence and the need by Greeks for timeless logic (1 Cor 1:18–25).

The Jews wanted to see a God of power and majesty who makes himself known in ways befitting a God who made the heavens and the earth. Such a God had once rescued Israel out of Egypt with eye-popping wonders and miracles. And now they are

supposed to believe that that same God has become incarnate and allowed himself to be killed without raising a finger to defend himself?<sup>11</sup> Such a lowly God is not worthy of worship.

The Greeks wanted a god of beauty and harmony that fit the cosmos that they observed. And so they conceived the divine in terms of a *logos*, that is, rational principle that governed and held together the harmonious working of the universe. In this cosmos everything had its place and everything had its purpose. So how could the *logos* be identified with such a “puny” man who endured a humiliating and disgraceful death? This diminished “the grandeur of the *Logos* as conceived by the ‘wisdom of the ages’ of Stoic philosophy.”<sup>12</sup>

Kolb further notes that both groups, the empiricists and the rationalists, “wanted to know God on the basis of a process that human creatures control.”<sup>13</sup> Yet in each instance, God confounded the expectations and conceptions of his fallen human creatures. God does not make himself known in ways that fit human assumptions, methods, and conclusions, or, that is, in epistemologies developed by humans. The cross and empty grave show in the starkest way possible that God does things his way, not our way.

On the cross, God reduces himself to nothing. He comes to his own people but they reject him. The Gospels stress that the suffering of the cross does not only entail the physical suffering of Jesus, but much more it entails the humiliation of his rejection by the very creatures he had made—not to mention the abandonment of his Father. There is no power on display there.<sup>14</sup> And there is certainly no wisdom evident there. It makes no sense that God chose to die.

Then with the resurrection, God brings everything out of nothing. Again, consider the cross. There is no life there. And yet out of the nothingness of death God raises the crucified Jesus to life and with him the promise of a new creation. George Murphy says it well:

The work of theology must begin on Calvary, where God is paradoxically revealed just at the point where God is most hidden. God Almighty identifies with the weakness and suffering of Creation, and participates in its dying. But the Resurrection of the Crucified is God’s act of Creation where Creation seems impossible—life from death and being from nonbeing.<sup>15</sup>

Here is what identifies God. In response to the question, “What kind of God do you have?” Luther advises, “Say, ‘First, my God is the Father, who made heaven and earth. Aside from this one alone I regard nothing as God, for there is no one else who could create heaven and earth.’”<sup>16</sup> This is who God is and what God does. As Luther expressed it, “For because he is God, this is his proper office, to create all things from nothing” (WA 40/3.09.9f).<sup>17</sup>

Luther’s reflection on God’s *creatio ex nihilo* finds its finest expression in thesis 28

of his Heidelberg Disputations—the capstone of the argument. By this point, he has demolished the arguments for human epistemologies as ways to know and control God. Now, Luther confesses God’s creation out of nothing as a creative love; “God’s love does not find, but creates that which is *pleasing (diligibile)* to it. Human love comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.”<sup>18</sup> Luther elaborates: “Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows out and bestows good. For this reason, sinners are attractive (*pulchri*) because they are loved (*diliguntur*); they are not loved because they are attractive.”<sup>19</sup>

Mark Mattes notes that the love about which Luther speaks here is not a generic or abstract love.<sup>20</sup> It is a love that originates in God’s heart and flows from the cross and bursts from the grave to clothe the ugly with “the beautiful garment of God’s love.” Such a conception of beauty, Mattes notes, would “totally catch ancient Greeks and Romans off guard: beauty is the offshoot of love, and not vice versa.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Promise of the Crucified and Risen Lord**

Consider now the implications of teaching and learning God’s autonomous and undeserved love. Neither reason nor empirical sight has access to what happened there. Yes, we are given witnesses and testimonies to the fact of his death and the fact of his resurrection. But what do those events mean for us? Are they of significance only for Christ? How do we know that these two events change everything? That all will be made new again (Rom 8:18–25)? That God creates everything out of nothing lies hidden beyond human grasp and beyond human knowing.<sup>22</sup> God’s question to Job is pertinent here. “Where were you when I established the foundations of the earth?” (Job 38:1ff).

Again, God must take the initiative. Having risen from the dead, Jesus speaks: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mt 28:18). As the pre-incarnate Son, Jesus had always possessed this authority in as much as all things had been created through him (Jn 1; 1 Cor 8; Col 1). But now Jesus speaks as the incarnate Son of God, our brother, who had been crucified and now has risen. He speaks with the authority of the Creator.

Jesus then sends the disciples into the world with a promise, “Because I live, you also will live” (Jn 14:19). This promise is “a word which creates new life from the nothingness of sin and death.” It is “neither a directive nor a description of a state of affairs” thus further situating philosophy science “as belonging to the temporal and not the eternal realm.”<sup>23</sup> And so, “Luther believed that the action of God in the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus could not be separated from the delivery of the benefits of Christ in his own day through the use of the Word in proclamation and in the sacraments.”<sup>24</sup>

With his promise, he invites faith.<sup>25</sup> This in fact, is the very nature and purpose of a promise. It seeks to instill confidence. This means that faith depends upon the authority—that is, the credibility and reliability—of a person. Abraham believed God



*Text in memory of Martin Luther in a square in Heidelberg. Carlos Delgado; CC-BY-SA.*

because he was “fully convinced that God was able to do [create out of nothing] what he had promised” (Rom 4:21). Abraham thus becomes the paradigmatic example for Reformers. In other words, faith “in the promise of God in Christ stands at the heart of the Christian’s existence.” It is, as Kolb points out, “the fundamental element of the *theologia crucis*.”<sup>26</sup>

This faith in the promise is not only about salvation. It goes to the fundamental orientation of the human person as a creature of God.

Faith means more than simply that trust that clings to Christ for the forgiveness of sins and life. Faith is also the more general trust in God’s person and in what he tells his people in his revelation. In the midst of their struggles against Satan, therefore, believers must realize that the Word of God teaches those things “which do not enter the human heart” since “reason is always being turned away from the truth and embracing whatever pleases it and seems to resemble the truth.”<sup>27</sup>

Thus the “theology of the cross,” as Luther conceived of it in 1518, “recognized God as the almighty Creator of all that is and prescribed an attitude of possible dependence and active reliance on God’s revelation of himself rather than a search for ‘the hidden God.’ Luther’s theology of the cross presumed that this dependence or trust in God—faith—constitutes the center and direction of the human creature.”<sup>28</sup>

The cross and resurrection show that God is not bound by anything or bound to do things a certain way. As the Creator, his love is both unbounded and boundless. Such *ex nihilo* love is incomprehensible to human creature . . . especially the fallen human creature. For this reason, the word of the cross proved to be “a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.” But this crucified Christ is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24–25). This word of the cross, along with the inspired and inerrant scriptures, belongs to the epistemology of faith . . . not to empiricism or rationalism.

### **The Cross and the Creation**

Next, I would show Susan how the cross not only makes God known as our Creator and Redeemer, but makes this world known to us as his creation for us to explore and enjoy.

The creative love that brings life out of the nothingness of death is the same creative love that brought the entire universe into existence out of nothingness. Such a thought was also scandalous for many in the ancient world. It gave us a God who was potentially fickle and capricious. But the cross shows that God’s omnipotence flows from the love of God, and this world is his beloved creation. This is his “proper work.” As Mattes notes, “Certainly there is nothing arbitrary about the ‘proper work’ of God, it exists precisely to create and nurture faith.”<sup>29</sup>

And that creative love out of nothing affirmed the value of this world. It was not an inferior mode of existence. The cross and empty tomb turn our eyes away from heaven toward the earth . . . first to a particular place named Golgotha and then outward to the entire earth. God embraced his creation by taking on a creaturely body.<sup>30</sup> He died for his human creatures in this creaturely body. With his bodily resurrection, a new creation burst into the midst of this groaning. Together they affirm the value and integrity of creation as God’s creation (1 Cor 15:35–50).

For this reason, faith that embraces the promise embraces God’s creation and the “this-ness” of the world. Faith restores us as creatures of God (now also adopted by him) and restores us as human creatures to this world, *our home*. Mattes points out the “embodiment of the word [administered in the sacraments or orally] acknowledges that faith at its core is markedly aesthetic, awakening the senses, opening receptivity, kindling wonder, and evoking gratitude.”<sup>31</sup> This means that we no longer need to study this world to get a handle on God and what he is up to within the world. Nor do we need to employ empiricism and current science to prop up biblical epistemology, as if it can’t stand on its own. We can focus on this world as we are called to do within our respective walks of life.

### **Restored as a Creature to Creation**

To say that God created the world out of nothing is a statement that is not limited to beginnings. As William Weinrich put it, *creatio ex nihilo* speaks to God’s character

and God's relation to the world.<sup>32</sup> As Luther said, God is no *deus otiosus* (idle god). He is continuously active within the world. But he works behind the scenes. Or to use Luther's language, he works behind his masks: "For Luther, there is no God to be had apart from some 'covering' or 'wrapper' whether that wrapper is God masking himself in created, material realities or giving himself sacramentally to the church."<sup>33</sup> Murphy suggests that God steps back to let his creatures receive the credit. Creatures are, as Luther put, the instruments, means, and hands through which God does all things. God is hidden; it is not surprising that scientists do not see him.

In creating the world out of nothing and partnering with his creatures, God has given his creation its own autonomy, or better said, it has a "relative autonomy."<sup>34</sup> This autonomy is what allows us to understand the workings of our world on its own terms. We can explain how rain occurs without explicit reference to God.<sup>35</sup> We can discern the laws by which it operates (e.g., gravity and planetary orbits). It is intelligible to us in a way that makes it possible to do science, to identify relationships between elements or between stars.

We are members of this creation, made from the earth for life on the earth, and God has equipped us for that life. We confess in the Small Catechism that God "has given me my reason and all my senses," These encompass imagination, intelligence, emotions, and so on. These are all gifts from God to be used by us, his human

creatures, despite our fallen condition and the fall's toll on our reason and senses. With these abilities, God says, "go out and play! Explore your new home. And while you are at it, exercise my benevolent dominion over all my creatures." Kolb has identified at least

*God is hidden; it is not surprising that scientists do not see him.*

four ways that we perceive and learn about our world that are important for science.<sup>36</sup>

First, we often learn by relying on the word of someone whom we trust as an authority. This is key for Christian faith as we saw previously. We rely on the authority of the one who has come back from the dead and know that we too will rise. We also rely on the authority of those we respect and trust when it comes to knowledge of our world. Children learn from parents, students learn from teachers. Patients learn from doctors, and the wider public learns from scientists. We rely on people who we regard as authorities either by virtue of their expertise or by virtue of their office.

Second, our senses and reason give us an empirical knowledge of the world. This form of knowledge is an incredibly powerful gift from God that enhances our life, from medicine to daily provisions. But we recognize that it is as human creatures (and fallen ones at that), that we frame the rules for acquiring knowledge and interpreting the results. This form of knowledge relies on observation, experimentation, conceptualizing, and submitting our findings to others for verification. One of the

reasons for the great success of this methodology is that it “allows reality to answer us back.” This is what “Karl Popper had in mind when he made falsifiability the criterion of demarcation between the scientific and non-scientific.”<sup>37</sup>

Third, our reason and imagination give us a rational or cognitive knowledge by which we construct working theories and paradigms to make sense of our world. Kolb rightly points out, “Without rational knowledge life in the horizontal realm could not function.” Overall, logical thinking can help us control and make sense of the sheer volume of “data that bombards us from nature and experience.”<sup>38</sup> Logic and critical thinking help us organize data by formulating working explanations for how things fit together. At the same time, these models are subject to ongoing reassessment and revision. Reason can take the form of inductive or deductive logic and ranges from sophisticated syllogisms to what many regard as common-sense knowledge.

Fourth, Kolb points out that aesthetic learning gives us yet another type of knowledge. Specifically, it gives us an appreciation and enjoyment of the beauty of God’s creation. As Mattes puts it, “Beauty is one way that those alive in Christ appreciate the world.”<sup>39</sup> And so “Human reasoning and human emotions combine with sense perceptions to enrich our eyes with the glories of color, shape, and form, of melody, harmony, and rhythm, of sights and sounds, of tastes, smells, and touches.”<sup>40</sup> This knowledge does not demand the same kind of “reliability that the empirical and rational approaches to learning require.” But it is often a sense of beauty and elegance that awakens wonder and arouses curiosity as well as encourages an ethic for living within the world. (Beauty is often an impulse for the care of creation.)<sup>41</sup>

Scientists often pursue their work out of a sense of wonder for the world. Einstein wrote,

You consider it strange that I sense the comprehensibility of the world . . . as a wonder . . . or an external mystery . . . Now, *a priori* one should expect a chaotic world which can in no way be grasped by thought. One could (better, should) expect that the world should prove subject to law only in so far as we intervene by putting order ourselves. It would be a type of orderliness like the alphabetic order of the words of a language. On the contrary, the kind of orderliness which results, for instance, from Newton’s theory of gravitation is of an entirely different character. Even though the axioms of the theory are set down by man, the success of such an enterprise presupposes a high level of order in the objective world which we have no *a priori* right to expect. There lies the ‘Wonder’ which increases steadily with the development of our knowledge. Here lies the weak point of the positivists and professional atheists who feel happy in the consciousness that they have not only successfully de-divinized . . . but even de-wonderized . . . the world.<sup>42</sup>

For Christians that wonder is enhanced; we know who creates it and why. Luther captures this in a house postil (1534). “Giving when it proceeds from true love, makes the gift all the greater and more precious. . . . On the other hand, if we doubt the existence of heartfelt love, we do not think very highly of the gift. If, therefore, God had given us only one eye, one foot, or one hand, and we were convinced that he had done this out of divine, fatherly love, then such eye, foot, or hand would be dearer to us than if there had been a thousand eyes, feet, or hands.”<sup>43</sup>

These epistemologies of human experiment, human rationality, or human aesthetic judgments are helpful for exploring and understanding our world. It is rarely the case that one epistemology is used for only one type of knowledge whether science or philosophy or the humanities.

A scientist who is a theologian of the cross will embrace these ways of knowing about our world, but will use them for learning about creation within the horizons of this world. Even though reason is darkened by sin, God has given us the ability to perceive and understand it, if not in its entirety, still often in remarkable ways. In addition, we use reason not to transcend this world in order to read the mind of God or eliminate the need for God.

As Luther puts it, “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it actually is.”<sup>44</sup> In the context of science, we acknowledge that what we have learned about the world is provisional; it is our best understanding at this time. It also implies that when we get things wrong, we should admit it. In other words, a theologian of the cross confesses with Paul, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12).

## **Theologian of the Cross and Science**

So what does it mean for science to work within the limits of human understanding and within the horizons of this world? Owen Gingerich, an astronomer and historian of science at Harvard University, wrote, “I believe that science concerns itself mostly with building *coherent patterns of explanation, and rather little with proof.*”<sup>45</sup> In other words, he argues that one of the tasks of science is to construct explanatory frameworks for making sense of or accounting for the relationships between as many of the phenomena as possible that are encountered in nature. Put another way, as S. Joshua Swamidass explains, science is not so much concerned with ultimate truth (i.e., God and God’s activity) as it is focused on what works to explain the world as we find it.

For this reason, as scientists carry out their work, they do not take into account God’s activity within their quantitative and explanatory frameworks for understanding the world. For example, Gingerich asks, “Why does the moon not fall to the earth like apples do?” At one level, it is possible to say that God’s sustaining activity keeps it there. That is true. But it can also be explained with Newton’s laws of motion. Though

gravity exerts a centripetal force on the moon pulling it toward the earth, the orbital speed of the moon and its distance from the earth provides a balancing centrifugal force. This keeps the moon from crashing into the earth. Such explanations suggest that to some extent the world can be understood on its own terms.

And so science “attempts to describe what happens in the world in terms of its own natural processes obeying rational laws” (or what theologians have called “secondary causes”) without reference to God. Indeed, “as far as science is concerned, God seems to be absent from the world.”<sup>46</sup> But as Lutherans, we shouldn’t be surprised or chagrined when scientists don’t see God at work. God’s way of the cross, after all, is to work in ways hidden to human perceptions.

Gingerich also notes that every pattern of explanation encounters data that do not fit the theory. In a paper that he co-authored with astronomer Alan Lightman they analyzed why scientists resist acknowledging anomalies.<sup>47</sup> Their thesis was

that anomalies will generally pass unrecognized until the availability of an alternate theory in which they suddenly make sense. . . . Until or unless there is another acceptable scientific explanation for the temporal and geographical distribution of plants and animals and their structural relationships, biological evolution will remain the paradigm among scientists.

But paradigms do shift, at times gradually, and at other times suddenly.<sup>48</sup> For example, on May 20, 1964, scientists at a Bell laboratory in New Jersey pointed their telescope at a quiet part of the sky and heard a consistent hissing that did not fit the Steady State theory of the universe but did fit the Big Bang theory.<sup>49</sup> Almost overnight, the paradigm shifted.

Thomas Kuhn provides a classic example with the shift from Ptolemy’s geocentric view of the universe to Copernicus’s heliocentric view of the universe.<sup>50</sup> The geocentric view reigned for centuries as a coherent framework for explaining the pattern or movement of the universe. But there were anomalies. Every eighteen months or so, Mars seems to stop in the sky, move backwards, and then move forwards again (known as the retrograde of the planets). How does one account for such an anomaly? Ptolemy accounted for it by developing a theory of epicycles. Mars was doing loop-the-loops around the earth.<sup>51</sup>

Copernicus provided a more compelling and persuasive theory. He placed the sun at the center, Earth on an inner orbit, and Mars on an outer orbit. Because of its inner orbit, the Earth moves faster than Mars. Every eighteen months or so, the Earth catches up to Mars and then passes it. (The same thing happens when you pass a car on the freeway. As you pull alongside the other car appears to stand still. As you pull ahead, the other car momentarily appears to move backwards.) It wouldn’t be until Galileo invented the telescope that Copernicus’s theory was shown to be true.

Many scientists (both Christian and non-Christian) use such paradigms not as

philosophical or metaphysical systems but as explanatory frameworks for scientific research. The immediate concern is *not* proving or disproving the Bible.

In a recent issue of *The Lutheran Witness*, Paul Edmon described the Big Bang theory in similar terms. “From a purely naturalistic, scientific view, the Big Bang theory is the best, and frankly, only, viable theory for the origins of the universe. It explains the age, the size, the composition and many other features we see in the world around us.” Again, he observes, “From a strictly scientific approach, the Big Bang is the primary theory based purely on the observational evidence. It is not flawless, but many believe that if you can get the Big Bang started it essentially produces the physical universe we see (frankly, it would not be a good scientific theory if it did not!).”<sup>52</sup>

Edmon acknowledges that the Big Bang theory provides a coherent pattern of explanation that “fits most of the evidence” [*italics added*]. He points out that it does not account for philosophical or theological anomalies or questions. For example, why is there something rather than nothing? Why does the universe happen to have physical laws that support life? Where did the energy that makes the universe come from? Why is the universe comprehensible to us? Why are there physical laws at all? All of these questions are most easily answered with God. Edmon rightly concludes that just “because you can explain something without God does not mean God does not exist.”<sup>53</sup>

### **The Scientist as a Theologian of Glory**

The epistemologies of empirical observation, rational thought, aesthetic judgement, and personal authority can help to understand this world *as creation*. But the fallen human creature is always tempted to transcend creatureliness and deny the limits of human epistemology in order to peer beyond the horizons of creation. Luther put it well in Heidelberg thesis 19: “That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who perceives (*conspicit*) the invisible things of God as understandable (*intellecta*) on the basis of those things have been made.”<sup>54</sup>

Theologians of glory “operate on the assumption that creation and history are transparent to the human intellect, that one can see through what is made and what happens so as to peer into the ‘invisible things of God.’”<sup>55</sup> A theologian of glory is not content with being a creature. A theologian of glory is supremely confident of human abilities and capacities to understand all things . . . including God, from the things that are made.

We invariably “go astray when we attempt to answer a different kind of question than the questions for which they [these epistemologies] were designed.”<sup>56</sup> Not only does one seek to prove or disprove God by extrapolating from our knowledge of this world, but in doing so, one actually misuses the world or forces it into one’s service. Yes, the Creator has made himself known by the things that he has made. Creation testifies to his power and divine nature. But theologians of glory are not satisfied with

that. A theologian of glory also wants to know the logic and rationale of God. They extrapolate from what is seen in creation to attempt to understand what directs God's thinking and actions. Theologians of glory use the best things, whether the world or human abilities, in the worst way, that is, for the purpose of idolatry (thesis 24).

By contrast, the "theology of the cross teaches that we can know God not through empirical proofs or logical reasoning, but only through faith (thesis 25). The faith elicited from us by his Word relies on God's foolish and weak approach to us in the suffering and death of his Son."<sup>57</sup> A theologian of the cross keeps reasons within the bounds of creation to understand God's *world* rather than extrapolating from the world to conclude things about *God* (e.g., Does God exist?).

And so we need to distinguish between science as an explanatory framework and science as a philosophy or dogma (scientism). Within the framework of Luther's two kinds of righteousness, science accounts for the world only in *coram hominibus* terms. This does not mean that it is always correct or true—much less ultimately true. In this life, it is always provisional. Given that human reason is fallen and thus fallible, scientists constantly challenge and should continue to challenge the prevailing paradigms or models of explanation.

### **Should Science and Reason Become Ultimate Authorities?**

When it comes to offering explanations, science carries an authority that is without peer in our world today, transcending nationalities, cultures, and religions. No aspect of our lives is untouched by science. Nearly everything we use is the result of science's successes. When we take into account its "palpable progress," there really has been nothing like it in the history of the world.<sup>58</sup>

And so it is hard to resist turning to science in order to find truth . . . including truth about God. This applies to both atheists and Christians. Both can become theologians of glory by granting science an ultimate authority on which our faith and lives rest. They just do it in different ways.

The most obvious way in which this takes place is with secular scientists. Science's incredible success at explaining how the world works has led some outspoken and often self-appointed representatives of science to conclude that science can explain everything. And so they move from making observations about the physical world to drawing conclusions about realities beyond the physical world or more likely, denying that there are any realities beyond this physical world.<sup>59</sup>

Some scientists even become militantly anti-religion or anti-Christianity. Religion is a threat to the system on which they stake their daily lives, their place within the universe, and their perception of meaning in the universe. People from Richard Dawkins to Stephen Hawking receive a level of media attention that gives the impression that all scientists are of like mind. Owen Gingerich expresses this well when he observes that "atheists use evolution to further their materialistic philosophies."<sup>60</sup> These idolatries seek to make God accountable to human judgement.<sup>61</sup>

Christians can fall into this danger as well. This can take at least two forms.

First, it may be tempting to play by the rules of empirical science when science is used to reject what the Bible teaches (e.g., about human origins) and thus undermine its credibility. One might argue that it is not “real science” or seek to reinterpret the data that scientists unearth to support a particular reading of the Bible that specifies a precise age for the universe. Even though the Bible gives the impression of a relatively young universe with its six-day creation it does not give an age; for this reason the age of the earth has not been considered a doctrinal issue. In this way, empirical science and rational thought are used to prop up our faith in the Bible by proving that it is true.

Second, one might try to harmonize the science and the Bible by reconsidering our reading of certain biblical texts with the goal of reconciling them with science and doing so in a way that is believed to be faithful to both the Scriptures and the creedal tradition of the church. Evangelical scientists and theologians, many of whom hold to the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible and the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch are engaging those questions in significant ways.<sup>62</sup> These scientists and theologians prefer to call themselves evolutionary creationists rather than theistic evolutionists. They hold to the conviction of both the Apostles and Nicene creeds that the triune God is creator of heaven and earth; evolutionary is simply a modifying adjective for God’s activity of creating. In other words, they maintain evolution is the means by which God created and continues to create.

In these instances, we must be careful not to construct human explanations to vindicate God’s truthfulness or to make God look good so that people find it safe to believe in him. Luther issues the following warning, “Although the works of human beings always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless probable to be mortal sins.”<sup>63</sup> Joel Okamoto has suggested that we can replace *works* with *explanations*. “Although the *explanations* of human beings always seem attractive and good, it is nevertheless probable that they are mortal sin.” Why? Because we tend to put our confidence in them. Our faith rests not on rational explanations or harmonizations but on the authority of the one who inspired the writers of the Scriptures with the very words of God.

## **Conclusion**

So, how do we answer Susan’s questions? What is the goal of our conversation? It might go something like this:

*Pastor:* Hi, Susan! Welcome back from college. How did your semester go?

*Susan:* It went really well. I enjoyed all of my courses, but I especially enjoyed the course on astronomy. It even got me thinking about pursuing a career in science.

*Pastor:* That’s awesome. Science in general and astronomy in particular are incredibly fascinating.

*Susan:* I agree. But I also struggle with certain aspects of it. Cosmology tells a

different story than Genesis does and even astronomy is hard to grasp without talking about a very old universe. Can I work with those ideas as a Christian?

*Pastor:* Why do you ask?

*Susan:* Well, it is hard to see how what science says about the universe and what I was taught about the Bible can both be true.

*Pastor:* I agree. That is a difficult question and many Christians who become scientists have struggled with it. Some felt that they had to choose one or the other. Others have sought to reconcile or harmonize them.

*Susan:* So what do you think? How do you handle it? After all, you taught me that the Bible gives us a God who created the universe in six days.

*Pastor:* Well, I like first to get my bearings on such questions. You know, figure out where I am standing and what the view is like from there.

*Susan:* So what does that mean?

*Pastor:* For Christians, we begin with the cross. After all it is because of Jesus's death and resurrection that we are Christians. And as you know, that alone does not make sense to many scientists or lots of other people. But Paul was aware of different perspectives.

*Susan:* You mean different ways of acquiring knowledge?

*Pastor:* Exactly. God has given us different ways of learning about him and his world. We call these epistemologies. We learn through observation, through thinking, we learn from our perception of beauty, and we learn from others based upon their authority. Each way of learning is suited for a particular kind of knowledge.

*Susan:* So some ways are appropriate for learning about God and others are more appropriate for learning about the world?

*Pastor:* Exactly. Our faith does not rest upon rational deductions or empirical evidence that we rightly use in history, math, debate, science, rhetoric, or engineering. It rests solely on a God who made himself known to us in Jesus and gave us his word.

*Susan:* So other forms of knowledge are better for helping us to understand our world?

*Pastor:* Yes, and I think we are required to take a critical stance over and against what we learn. We need to ask what their assumptions are with which they work. What influences their methods and interpretations? But science has been very good at challenging previously held views.

*Susan:* Like when scientists shifted from a geocentric view of the solar system to a heliocentric view?

*Pastor:* That's a great example. But I also think that each way of acquiring knowledge needs to acknowledge its limitations or boundaries. No single epistemology can be used for everything. For example, because I cannot

analyze a definition for beauty doesn't mean that beauty doesn't exist. Or because empirical observation cannot see God doesn't mean that God doesn't exist. Or because God has given us his authoritative word doesn't mean that God has given us an answer to every single question. It is more important to inquire, what are the questions that the Bible asks to which it gives answers?

*Susan:* So can one work in science and seek to explain the world without bringing God into the discussion?

*Pastor:* To some extent. To use an example from Luther, a Christian shoemaker can cobble excellent shoes without putting little crosses on them. Christian historians do the same thing when they write histories of the church. They may see the hand of God at work in men like Martin Luther, but they can't cite a document or source that says, "God told Luther to go to Worms." They have to work within the rules of how one writes history and what kinds of evidence are marshalled. But that doesn't mean God isn't at work.

*Susan:* So that would be like saying that we can explain weather patterns without reference to God. We can talk about cold fronts and warm fronts that help us predict future weather.

*Pastor:* But even while we can acknowledge this, we also need to recognize when certain boundaries are transgressed.

*Susan:* What do you mean?

*Pastor:* Well, just because we can explain weather without needing to reference God, that doesn't mean we then conclude that God is not involved or that we shouldn't pray to God asking for rain during a drought. Faith still sees this as God's world.

*Susan:* So when it comes to astronomy, we can explain how stars form and what causes them to explode as supernovae without bringing God into the equation. But that doesn't mean God is not present and active in his creation.

*Pastor:* That's right. But we also need to know that the knowledge we acquire from empirical observation or rational thought, or sense of beauty cannot answer certain questions like: Why are we here? Is there a purpose to my life? Is there meaning to the universe? To try to answer those questions is to try to become like God and look at the universe from his perspective. But as God once asked Job, "Where were you when I set the foundations of the earth?"

*Susan:* So I don't have to prove exactly how science and the Bible fit together?

*Pastor:* It means that our faith does not depend upon refuting science or harmonizing science with the Bible. Scientific explanations are always provisional. That is, they attempt to describe the world as best as scientists are able, given the scientific data available. As such, they are always open to reconsideration. On the other hand, the Bible doesn't address many scientific matters. That's okay, too, for the Bible wasn't written for that purpose. I hold to the account of creation as set forth in Genesis because I believe

the Scriptures are faithful and true. But I can also understand how certain theories (gravity, thermodynamics, even the Big Bang) can make sense of the universe when God or the Bible isn't part of the conversation. In the end, my faith really doesn't depend on explanations that reconcile these things and it isn't threatened by such discrepancies or even contradictions. My faith relies on a person named Jesus who was raised from the dead and has given me his promises. Thus I don't have to resolve every conundrum...in a sense that is not my vocation as a human creature.

*Susan:* So you're saying that we need to keep these things within their appropriate domains because of their different modes of inquiry and thus their limitations.

*Pastor:* Yes. And within those boundaries, we should continually challenge the assumptions, methods, and the conclusions of science and not accept it as dogma or scientism. And I believe that actually stands in the best tradition of science.

*Susan:* Thank you, I think that helps.

*Pastor:* In the meantime, God's work in the world continues to unfold and moves toward an ending (or new beginning) when all things will be revealed.

## Endnotes

- 1 See David Kinnaman with Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011).
- 2 This includes teaching in accord with the doctrinal statement of the Missouri Synod as set forth in the *Brief Statement* that was adopted in 1932. It states, "We teach that God has created heaven and earth, and that in the manner and in the space of time recorded in the Holy Scriptures, especially Gen. 1 and 2, namely, by His almighty creative word, and in six days." (<https://www.lcms.org/doctrine/doctrinal-position>).
- 3 Enrico Cantore defines scientism as a "philosophical tenet," namely, "the view that science is the universal and uniquely acceptable form of knowledge." *Scientific Man: The Humanistic Significance of Science* (New York: ISH Publications, 1977), 249.
- 4 Robert Kolb, *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 21.
- 5 Timothy Wengert, ed., *The Annotated Luther, v. 1: Roots of Reform* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 67–120.
- 6 Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Theology of the Cross," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (2002): 464.
- 7 Robert Kolb, "Deus revelatus – Homo revelatus. Luthers theologia crucis für das 21. Jahrhundert," in Robert Kolb and Christian Neddens, *Gottes Wort vom Kreuz* (OUH 40), (Oberursel: Lutherische Theol. Hochschule, 2001), 34.
- 8 Jon Mackenzie, "Luther's Topology: *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and the Cultivation of the Concept of Place in Martin Luther's Theology," *Modern Theology* 29, no. 2 (April 2013): 97. Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5," in Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works* 1, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 68.
- 9 Kolb, "Luther on the Theology of the Cross," 444.
- 10 Peter Berger, "Worldly Wisdom, Christian Foolishness," *First Things* no. 5 (August 1990): 17.

- 11 Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011) Kindle, 66.
- 12 Ibid., 51.
- 13 Kolb, *The Christian Faith*, 22.
- 14 Oswald Bayer, "God's omnipotence." *Lutheran Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (March 1, 2009): 85–102.
- 15 George L. Murphy, "The Theology of the Cross and God's Work in the World," *Zygon* 33 (June 1998): 224. See also his book, *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross* (Salem, OR: Trinity Press International, 2003).
- 16 Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) [hereafter cited, *BC*]. *BC* 432; LC II, 11.
- 17 Quoted in William Weinrich, "Creatio Ex Nihilo," unpublished paper [n.d.]. For the standard work on this theme in Luther's theology see Johannes Schwanke, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: Luthers Lehre von der Schöpfung aus dem Nichts in der Großen Genesisvorlesung (1535–1545)* (Berlin: Walder de Gruyter, 2004). For summaries in English, see Johannes Schwanke, "Martin Luther's Doctrine of Creation," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2016) and "Luther on creation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): 1–20.
- 18 Wengert, *Roots of Reform*, 85.
- 19 Ibid., 104.
- 20 Mark Mattes, *Luther's Theology of Beauty* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), pre-publication manuscript, 16.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Kolb, *The Christian Faith*, 20,
- 23 Mattes, 34.
- 24 Robert Kolb, "Luther's Theology of the Cross Fifteen Years after Heidelberg: Lectures on the Psalms of Ascent," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 61 (January 2010): 74.
- 25 Kolb, *The Christian Faith*, 25.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Kolb, "Luther's Theology of the Cross Fifteen Years after Heidelberg," *WA* xl/3, 34, line 12–35, lines 1, 29–34. Kolb also refers to the discussion of the clash between faith and human senses on Psalm cxxi.3 at *WA* xl/3, 58, line 29–67, line 21, p. 79.
- 28 Kolb, "Luther's Theology of the Cross Fifteen Years after Heidelberg," 71.
- 29 Mattes, 18.
- 30 See Charles Arand, "The Incarnation's Embrace of Creation," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 50 (2016): 177–189.
- 31 Mattes, 10.
- 32 Weinrich, "Creatio ex nihilo," 6.
- 33 Mattes, 22.
- 34 Thanks to Joel Okamoto for this felicitous insight.
- 35 Murphy intriguingly suggests that in choosing to conceal himself within creation God wants his creatures to receive the credit. "The Theology of the Cross and God's Work in the World," 230.
- 36 Kolb, *The Christian Faith*, 22–26.
- 37 Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, *Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Won't Go Away* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2014), 25. It should also be noted that the cognitive sciences have established that our rational capacities are quite approximate and limited even in the careful methodology of the sciences.
- 38 Kolb, *The Christian Faith*, 23.
- 39 Mattes, 11.
- 40 Kolb, *The Christian Faith*, 24.
- 41 See for example, Allen Carlson and Sheila Lintott, eds, *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism: From Beauty to Duty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Gregory Wolfe, *Beauty will Save the World: Recovering the Human in an Ideological Age* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2011).
- 42 Quoted in Cantore, *Scientific Man*, 103. See also <http://inters.org/Cantore-Wonder-Awe>.

43 *Sermons of Martin Luther—The House Postils, II*: 196–197.  
44 Wengert, *Roots of Reform*, 84.  
45 Owen Gingerich, “Further Reflections on Darwin on Trial,” *Perspectives on Science and Faith*, 44 (December 1992): 253–254 (<http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1992/PSCF12-92Gingerich.html>) [italics added].  
46 Murphy, 225.  
47 Alan Lightman and Owen Gingerich, “When do Anomalies Begin?” *Science* 255: 690–694.  
48 For a readable book with many such examples, see Susan Bauer, *The Story of Western Science: From Aristotle to the Big Bang Theory* (New York: Norton, 2015).  
49 <http://www.npr.org/2014/05/20/314239930/big-bangs-afterglow-two-scientists-recall-their-big-discovery>  
50 T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).  
51 Bauer, *The Story of Western Science*.  
52 Paul Edmon, “Stars, Galaxies, and Light,” *Lutheran Witness* (March 2017): 17.  
53 Ibid.  
54 Wengert, *Roots of Reform*, 83.  
55 Quoted in Kolb, “Luther on the Theology of the Cross,” 446.  
56 Kolb, *The Christian Faith*, 25.  
57 Ibid.  
58 Goldstein, 25.  
59 We can see an example of this in E. O. Wilson’s book, *Consilience to which Wendell Berry responded with Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), 40. See also, “Is Life a Miracle?” in *Citizenship Papers* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2003), 184–186.  
60 Gingerich, 253.  
61 Peter Berger, “Worldly Wisdom, Christian Foolishness,” *First Things*, No. 5, August/September 1990, 20.  
62 See for example the recent collection of essays; Kathryn Applegate and J. B. Stump, eds., *How I Changed My Mind about Evolution: Evangelicals Reflect on Faith and Science* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).  
63 Wengert, *Roots of Reform*, 89.

# Science, Religion, and God's Two Kingdoms

## A Lutheran Framework for Instruction

Russell Moulds



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Heinrich Bornkamm concludes his treatise, *Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms in the Context of His Theology*, by noting the obligation that Luther's two-kingdom framework places on the Christian. This duty includes the latitude and responsibility to rethink and re-apply

Luther's conceptions and applications in the context and tasks of the present age.<sup>1</sup> One of Luther's applications of the biblical worldview directed the strongest students away from theological and pastoral studies and, instead, toward secular studies:

Indeed there is need in this [secular] office for abler people than are needed in the office of preaching, so it is necessary to get the best young men for this work. For in the preaching office, Christ does the whole thing by his Spirit, but in the worldly kingdom men must act on the basis of reason—wherein the laws also have their origin—for God has subjected temporal rule and all of physical life to reason. He has not sent the Holy Spirit from heaven for that purpose.<sup>2</sup>

Luther encouraged the more gifted students to prepare for service to the princes to promote justice and the public welfare and to guard the interests and well-being

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### *Editor's note*

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of the church. We might concur or demur with Luther about this practice, but given our “post-Christendom” times, we might pursue a both/and approach with his recommended tactic. Today we prepare young people thoroughly in the sciences, ensuring their credibility among their professional peers, while also preparing them to distinguish and apply the two strategies of God’s two kingdoms.

The “genius of Luther’s theology,” to use a helpful expression from Robert Kolb and Charles Arand,<sup>3</sup> was Luther’s realization that God always deals with his creation and with us in two ways, and these two ways, while separate and distinct, always interact with each other to accomplish God’s good aims. Luther’s theology, then, is characterized by two words (law and gospel), two modes for disclosure (God hidden and God revealed), two kinds of righteousness (our passive righteousness in Christ and our active righteousness in response to Christ), two spiritual conditions (simultaneously saint and sinner), and two kingdoms (God’s left-hand activity and his right-hand activity). These features, in concert with each other, comprise a profoundly fruitful and faithful approach to the sciences.

What we broadly call science is a human cultural institution within God’s left-hand kingdom.<sup>4</sup> As with all that is human and all that is creation, the institution of science is an opportunity for intersections with the promises of God’s right-hand kingdom. Luther’s exposition of the two kingdoms supplies Christian higher education with the means to teach the modern sciences: what is clearly established, what is tentative, what is speculative, what is discounted, and what may yet be discovered. Simultaneously his two-kingdom doctrine includes the teaching of the sciences as a context to engage the living and active word of God’s right-hand kingdom. This approach avoids the typical confusions in the science-and-religion disputes which either (a) compartmentalize science from religion as if God’s handiwork can be bifurcated; or (b) conflate the things of this world with the promises of God’s kingdom of grace as if the close of this present age had already arrived and we live only in the next aeon. Thus the two-kingdom context is propitious for teaching the modern sciences not merely because it is integral to the Lutheran tradition but because it is fruitful for the Christian’s participation in both of God’s kingdoms.

## **A Framework**

In God’s sight I was begotten and multiplied immediately when the world began because this word, “and God said; ‘Let us make man,’” created me too. Whatever God wanted to create, he created when he spoke. Not everything has come into view at once. Similarly an arrow, or a ball which is shot from a cannon (for it has greater speed), is sent to its target in a single moment, as it were, and nevertheless it is shot through a definite space. So God through his word extends his activity from the beginning of the world to its end.<sup>5</sup>

Luther's provocative comment indicates that he found in the Scriptures a dynamic, kinetic relationship between God and his creation. Other established insights from the Lutheran tradition about the world and God's activity provide the framework for teaching the sciences in their left-hand kingdom secularity and for teaching that science is a human construct not exempt from God's word and work.<sup>6</sup> This framework distinguishes Lutheran higher education in the sciences from efforts among other Christian traditions to address the emergence of the natural and social sciences. Those efforts, informed by important but often limited themes from Scripture and selected in response to a particular controversy, have generally yielded a rather static approach toward the sciences. While well intended, such efforts tend to stall as, ironically, they become part of the controversy, mired in the secular arguments deployed by partisans.

The Lutheran tradition provides a more robust ethos. Among the several powerful Reformation insights, these five provide a platform for understanding and teaching the sciences.

1. Again, the two kingdoms: God is at work for the sake of sinners and his creation by means of a two-fold strategy—one temporal, the other eternal—which the Lutheran tradition discusses in various ways and with several applications as “the two kingdoms.”<sup>7</sup> Both kingdoms are God's kingdoms in which he actively and creatively continues his good work. Through the left-hand kingdom God preserves the world and provides to and through all honorable (and even dishonorable) human endeavors those skills, arts, knowledge, and roles of service which apply his love to his creation. Through the right-hand kingdom, God provides his means of grace and love for sinners through the atoning work of Christ. Called to serve our neighbor in the world, we Lutheran Christians study and teach the sciences as an activity of vocation in response to God's redeeming love. As his called servants we find and select opportunities in the sciences in which proclamation of his new and coming kingdom intersects, informs, and contextualizes what we teach about the present world.
2. The church's great theological traditions are not of one mind about the human mind. Among several issues in biblical anthropology is the extent to which human rationality is congruent with God's rationality and whether our notions of rationality even apply to God (cf. Is 1:18 and Is 55:8–9). The discussion is ongoing, but the Lutheran tradition has mapped out some useful coordinates for conducting that discussion. While human reason can in no way attain God's grace and mercy, we did not lose entirely our capacity to understand, regulate, and shape the world. Reason retains its logical, empirical, and culture-making abilities. Despite the ways that sin turns these retained blessings inward to self-service and self-glorification rather than upward toward God and outward to-

ward neighbor, God remains at work in his left-hand kingdom acting through both the faithful and non-faithful to exercise that rationality for his good and preserving purposes. To this

*Scripture testifies to and nature confirms God's creative power and his majesty.*

end, Melancthon, Luther, and the other reformers fostered higher education for the arts and sciences tempered by God's word (1 Cor 2:1–15, 2 Cor 3:18). Thus, we teach the sciences in their fullness and their tentativeness even as we acknowledge “the depths of the riches and the wisdom and knowledge of God” (Rom 11:33) which the sciences cannot apprehend.<sup>8</sup>

3. *Finitum capax infiniti* is a Lutheran aphorism that translates as “the finite can accommodate the infinite.” While this specifically addresses the issue of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist, more generally it conveys the biblical relationship of Creator and creature. This Lutheran insight insists on the absolute distinction of creature and Creator but also insists (much to the consternation of other Christian traditions) that they do not exclude each other. *Finitum capax infiniti* recognizes that God is not the product of human metaphysics or ontological axioms, whether from science or philosophy. Instead, this insight peculiar to Lutheranism<sup>9</sup> acknowledges the biblical view that God can be present and at work in his creation in ways and events that he discloses to us—such as the incarnation and the sacraments—and in ways and processes he does not disclose. (Another of Luther's frequent expressions was, “Let God be God.”<sup>10</sup>) Thus, the Lutheran tradition embraces the sciences fully aware that God is at work in his creation in ways we cannot know (Rom 11:33, Dt 29:29, Ps 92:5, Job 38–39) and in ways we can and should investigate—and about which we can rightly, wrongly, and sometimes only approximately, hypothesize, theorize, and speculate. When such human reasoning is wrong, roughly approximate, or persistently controversial, the Lutheran tradition includes that content as part of the academic discussion and disputation in higher education. Thus, that content is not unassailable, not conclusive, and certainly not axiomatic. It is, however, an essential part of our vocation to serve our neighbor within God's mandate to subdue and care for the earth, understand human activities within God's left-hand kingdom, and inform students about disputes within those activities.
4. Contrary to much of academic theology and philosophy, the Lutheran tradition maintains an acute awareness of the limits of natural theology. Scripture testifies to and nature confirms God's creative power and his majesty. When Scripture tells us that “the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof” (Ps 24:1), it reveals what Luther (following Aristotle) calls the material cause—God as source or

origin—but not the efficient causes which explain how God works in nature.<sup>11</sup> However, we do know what sinners need to know of God, and this knowledge comes from the cross of Christ. Apart from the cross, our knowledge of God is limited and in many ways distorted by sin. Paul Althaus observes that Luther does not claim access to God’s word in order to detect God’s processes governed by natural law but only “the great and wonderful deeds of God.”<sup>12</sup> Where the scholasticism that dominated Luther’s own early education blended theology with Aristotle’s encyclopedic worldview, the Reformers instead limited Aristotle’s logic of causation to what we with limited human reason may be able to detect in nature. Another Latinism, then, is *Deus absconditus*, which refers to God’s hiddenness (Dt 29:29). In Luther’s framework drawn from Scripture rather than philosophy and speculation, most of what God does and how he works is masked and hidden from our now-compromised postlapsarian rationality. Jeff Mallison describes this approach to reason and science as “methodological hiddenness” and points out that, “contemplating the cross, Lutheran educators can avoid both the implicit atheism of secularists and the temptation to pry into God’s mysterious plans.”<sup>13</sup>

5. While our posture regarding science is characterized with appropriate humility compelled by God’s hiddenness, nevertheless our vocation and our proper righteousness—a faith active in Christ’s love on behalf of our neighbor—impel us to an animated and robust study across the sciences. Many Reformation scholars including Heiko Oberman, Robert Benne, and Steven Ozment maintain that the Wittenberg Reformation was chiefly a university movement, and cite Luther’s imperative question, “How dare you not know what you can know!” For example, Luther shared the geocentric cosmology of most learned people of his day. Nevertheless, he and his colleagues at Wittenberg University included in their curriculum the Copernican heliocentric model despite the radical, counter-intuitive, and exegetically problematic status of that view.<sup>14</sup> They were able to do this because their redesigned arts and sciences curriculum was not biblicistic; instead, it was vigorously informed by the entire biblical narrative rather than selected texts. That curriculum was then shaped and critiqued by the set of insights about the gospel these Reformers had refined. This approach to academics enabled them to instruct what was current and emerging in the arts, letters, and sciences without necessarily endorsing that content as conclusive. A Lutheran faculty, then, regards and conducts such instruction as good stewardship within both kingdoms: as genuine love of neighbor through the vocation of teaching; and as a context for examining the products of our reasoning in light of the promises of God. This two-kingdom engagement of vocation from God and proper righteousness in his world sustains our humility rather than partisan rancor over some current but temporal controversy.

## **What Does This Mean for Us?**

The Lutheran tradition is a rich, multifaceted theological and intellectual context for teaching the sciences. While all the major spiritual traditions within the historical church have much to offer for teaching and understanding the human institution and practice of science, the Lutheran ethos contains a set of themes and insights capable of addressing and explicating both of God's kingdoms, each in its distinction, yet always in relation to each other. As these themes intersect and inform each other and the wider discussion, they do so in a dialectical manner rather than a dualistic, exclusionary, or co-mingling way.<sup>15</sup> This two-kingdom framework enables us to teach both strategies by which God is always addressing us and is at work in creation. They allow us to examine how our condition in the world—his left-hand kingdom—prepares us for instances when the promise and power of his right-hand kingdom intrudes, sometimes gently and quietly, sometimes abruptly and with offense (1 Cor 1:18ff). A thorough exposure to the knowledge we draw from the sciences, and the various claims and views that disputants impute to and about the sciences, provides an academic context (one among the other disciplines of higher education) for testing various worldviews and considering what God's ultimate work in Christ says about those views.

Moreover, higher education, including the sciences, within the Lutheran tradition is not characterized by what other faith traditions sometimes call "faith integration" in which the Bible or the instructor's personal faith is interspersed within the curriculum (although this also can appropriately occur in Lutheran instruction). Nor does Lutheran higher education defer to "the autonomy of the academic discipline" as if any discipline is self-contained within its own ontology and presuppositions (although Lutheran higher education always respects and values the expertise and methodology of each academic discipline). Rather, the Lutheran tradition with its Reformation insights conducts an active and ongoing dialectic in which the discipline is taught in its entirety and its content is exposed to and critiqued by the entire biblical perspective on man and God.

Dialectic implies dialogue. An integral feature of higher education in the Lutheran tradition is patient, practical wisdom, and extra effort from those engaged in this tradition. The Lutheran dialectic in higher education precludes departments and professors from operating independently or in an exclusive fashion (this despite an element of hostile polemics in the history of Lutheran thought, as in all activities among sinners). Instead, the Reformation's array of insights about the biblical narrative and the gospel calls for participation and contributions from across disciplines in the manner of a genuine university in contrast to today's "multiversity" or "utiliversity."<sup>16</sup> This character of the Lutheran tradition's dialectical ethos especially distinguishes it from today's secular higher education—and those who dismiss or impede this participation exclude themselves from higher education that is Lutheran. The list below will illustrate this point for the sciences and other disciplines.

While for many Christians the concern about science and religion is the dispute over Darwinism, several areas in research, cultural influence, and public policy related to the sciences are also matters of attention and potential tension. We list several here:

- The origins perspectives: the universe, life, species, humans
- Neuroscience and jurisprudence
- The media and popularized science
- Evolutionary psychology
- Ecology and the stewardship of creation
- Geology and deep time
- Science, religion, and the public square
- Epigenetics, sex differentiation, and gender
- The nature of consciousness

Note that the arts, letters, and sciences are all included in these areas of attention. Addressing such issues calls for expertise from multiple disciplines. Christian professors and participants from across the disciplines bring to the discussions both left-hand kingdom expertise and their articulation of God's right-hand strategy and promises.

## **Conclusion**

The Lutheran tradition, among all the church's orthodox traditions, is especially well positioned to assess these issues with its dialectical approach to the relationship of the two kingdoms. God is always at work in both kingdoms, though with different strategies for each, using the tension these different strategies generate to alert humanity to its condition and draw sinners to the coming kingdom in Christ. Higher education that uses this tradition and framework is of paramount service to students, to the church, and to the world.

To use the evolution issue as an example: the Christian and Lutheran professor, by disciplined instruction, conveys to students a thorough treatment of several evolutionary views—classic nineteenth-century Darwinism, the twentieth-century neo-Darwinian synthesis, recent models in molecular evolution, and the multiple mechanism model—sufficient for clearly understanding the claims and content of these views.<sup>17</sup>

The professor does this, not to instill that set of ideas as a conviction within the student but as part of the professor's vocation of love and service to neighbor. In this way, the students are informed and equipped to understand and appraise this content that is current and widely, though not universally, accepted in our culture.

Simultaneously, the professor applies, and helps students apply, Reformation insights that intersect this content, that exhibit the tension between the two kingdoms, and that enable students to examine critically compatible, disputed, and incommensurable views of the sciences. Because those Reformation insights issue from the Bible's account of the world and our condition, the Lutheran tradition

further assists understanding how those views relate—some more coherently, some less coherently—to the biblical narrative, to the Bible’s whole counsel of God, and to the gospel. In these ways, we sustain teaching the eternal concerns as the Formula of Concord denotes, “This we believe, teach, and confess” (Epitome, 1) while also instructing in the temporal content of the liberal arts—content we impart as matters of human inquiry within God’s left-hand kingdom.

In *Lutheran Education: From Wittenberg to the Future*, a study of the Lutheran tradition and its roots in the liberal arts, Thomas Korcok offers this counsel:

The knowledge gained from the natural world leads to a fuller understanding of the complexities of creation and, therefore, divine truth. It is helpful to view the modern sciences as being similar to the subjects of the historic quadrivium which dealt with the mathematical arts. In this case, the trivial arts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric are important in that they enable a proper interpretation of the value of scientific knowledge gained through research, and an understanding that this knowledge is a manifestation of the greater truth. An Evangelical [Lutheran] liberal arts pedagogy that fully incorporates the study of natural science would allow students to learn the relevant scientific research and delve into the implications of the research on their worldview. Accordingly, students need to be well read, have a basic grasp of the tools of logic, and be able to enunciate their views with relative coherence. The history of the liberal arts is one of constant change in response to new demands and new areas of knowledge. It follows then that a modern Evangelical curriculum would seek to fully incorporate the modern study of natural and applied sciences.<sup>18</sup>

The Lutheran tradition educes a higher education that conducts a two-kingdom strategy with regard to the sciences (as well as all other human endeavors). Science is a human cultural institution within God’s left-hand kingdom. As such, science is both a context for vocation—that is, serving the neighbor—and an opportunity for intersections and encounters with the promises of God’s right-hand kingdom.

When science that informs the Christian about the world, its fallen condition, and Christian and non-Christian perceptions of that condition, is censored or silenced, Scripture reveals God’s left-hand strategy, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Mt 10:16), and reminds us who the master teacher is. And when other pronouncements exceed evidence, data, and theory in the sciences and begin making ultimate claims about the nature of existence itself, Scripture reveals God’s right-hand strategy, “I will know nothing among you except Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2), and reminds us who the author and Lord of life is.

## Endnotes

- 1 Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms in the Context of His Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1966), 37.
- 2 Martin Luther, "Children in School", *LW* 46:242.
- 3 Robert Kolb and Charles Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).
- 4 Scientists who work every day in the practices of empiricism find this observation strange, and often do not notice the cultural foundations of their profession and processes. C. P. Snow wrote extensively on this myopia fifty years ago. See, for example, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Eastford, CT: Martino reprint, 2013). More recently, Susan Bauer has addressed matters of science and culture in *The Story of Science* (New York City: W.W. Norton, 2015.)
- 5 Martin Luther, Lectures on Genesis, *LW* 1:75, *WA* 42:57.
- 6 For an essay-length discussion of several Reformation insights see Russ Moulds, ed., "What's Lutheran About Lutheran Teaching?" in *A Teacher of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), ch 9. For a brief, well-written book-length treatment, see Gene Edward Veith, *The Spirituality of the Cross* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999).
- 7 Luther's two-kingdom doctrine is an essential and nuanced biblical theme that was often oversimplified in theological literature of the nineteenth and twentieth century. More recent treatments have renewed an appreciation of this contribution from the Lutheran tradition. For an application to education see Joel Heck and Angus Menuge, eds., "One Kingdom Teaches the Other: The Two Strategies of Lutheran Education" in *Learning at the Foot of the Cross* (Austin: Concordia University Press, 2011), ch. 6.
- 8 Luther regarded human reason in terms both a positive and negative. See Paul Althaus, "Reason" in *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1966), ch. 8.
- 9 Robert W. Jenson, "Finitum Capax Infiniti" in *Lutheran Slogans: Use and Abuse* (Delhi, NY: ALPB Books, 2011), ch 5.
- 10 Althaus, "God is God," *The Theology of Martin Luther*, ch. 10.
- 11 William J. Wright, *Martin Luther's Understanding of God's Two Kingdoms: A Response to the Challenge of Skepticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 143–144.
- 12 Althaus, 109.
- 13 Joel Heck and Angus Menuge, eds., "How We Know," *Learning at the Foot of the Cross*, 124.
- 14 This topic is frequently cited in the literature on curriculum revision at Wittenberg University in the 1520s. See for example Susan Mobley's discussion in "Historical Foundations in the Lutheran Reformation" in *Learning at the Foot of the Cross*, 19.
- 15 Ernest Simmons, *Lutheran Higher Education: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 41.
- 16 See Reinhard Hutter, "Polytechnic Untilversity," *First Things*, November 2013 (also available online at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/11/polytechnic-utiliversity>).
- 17 A helpful examination of why and how the views and debates about origins are incommensurable yet teachable is found in Gerald Rau, *Mapping the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).
- 18 Thomas Korcok, *Lutheran Education: From Wittenberg to the Future* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 271.

# Modern Science, Contemporary Culture, and Christian Theology

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This article explains modern science as a *cultural* problem for the church and offers several suggestions for theology in this situation. Explaining science as a cultural problem draws attention to the *symbolic* significance that science has today. The interest and concern

that science raises shows that many acknowledge this significance. The church's engagement with science, however, often shows that Christians fail to understand science's cultural significance properly. This article seeks to explain this cultural significance and to suggest some of its theological implications.

## Introduction

Science poses several kinds of questions to contemporary Christians. There are questions of biblical authority and interpretation, like “Was the universe created in six twenty-four days?” and questions of doctrine, such as “How does the Christian doctrine of the human creature speak to whole-body transplants and artificial intelligence?” There are questions of pastoral care, like “What about cloning human beings?” and questions concerning witness and outreach, such as “Do converts to the Christian faith have to renounce belief in the Big Bang or evolution?”

All of these questions are important, but we should also consider *why* these particular questions are important. Why do *these* questions get attention when other questions do not? For example, take other important matters of biblical interpretation. It is often said that the church's mission is “to seek and save that which was lost.” But when Jesus said this, he had in mind seeking and saving tax collectors

and sinners like Zacchaeus, that is, lost children of Abraham. This goes along with the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (Lk 15), all of which speak about why Jesus received “sinners.” A mission to the entire world is not in sight here. It is often said that we learn that faith is a gift of God in Ephesians 2:8–9. But a look at the Greek will cast serious doubt on this claim. Isaiah 53 says about the Suffering Servant: “The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.” This passage is often used to show that Christ died for the sins of the world. However, “us all” here is “all Israel,” not “all humankind.” But these matters of interpretation bear on mission, faith, and the crucifixion—all important matters, and all subject to confusion and error. But confusion and error in these cases worry few Christians. In my experience, not many are willing even to discuss these matters openly and frankly—they quickly become defensive or dismissive. If this is the case, then why get worked up over Genesis 1? What makes this passage so special?

The answer for this question and for other usual questions about science and the Christian faith is that science poses a *cultural* problem for Christians. This is old news in the United States, and everybody knows it. But not many consider how and why this problem happens and what this problem implies, and perhaps not many would care to. But Christians should.

### ***How and Why Science Is a Cultural Problem for Christians***

Explaining that science has *cultural* significance involves two important senses of the word, namely, culture as *symbolically important activities, persons, events, and so on*, and culture as *a whole way of life*. T. S. Eliot brought up both of these senses, and an understandable confusion about them, in his influential book *Notes toward a Definition of Culture*:

[Culture] includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar.<sup>1</sup>

There is a contradiction between the definition—all the characteristic activities and interests of a people—and the illustrations. As Raymond Williams explained:

This pleasant miscellany is evidently narrower in kind than the general description which precedes it. The “characteristic activities and interests” would also include steelmaking, touring in motor-cars, mixed farming, the Stock Exchange, coal mining and London Transport. Any list would be incomplete, but Eliot’s categories are sport, food and a little art—a characteristic observation of English leisure.<sup>2</sup>

And as Terry Eagleton, following Williams, observed: “Eliot, in other words, takes himself to be describing culture as a whole way of life . . . but is in fact restricting the notion to customs and symbolic practices.”<sup>3</sup>

Eliot’s own confusion, however, draws attention to an important question: “Does the culture of a people include its practical, material mode of existence, or should it be confined to the symbolic sphere?”<sup>4</sup> By restricting the notion of culture to the symbolic sphere one asks about and discusses matters that stand out, inform, and influence, but by including matters of brute existence in one’s definition of culture, one ensures that mundane concerns and activities, essential but often overlooked, can be accounted for. The Queen has unquestionable symbolic value for the English, meaning that she stands for a typical set of thoughts, feelings, responses, and images. This was illustrated shortly after the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union in 2016 (the so-called Brexit vote). Andrew Rosindell, a Conservative MP, made a motion calling on BBC One to play “God Save The Queen” at the end of each day’s programming. He said the BBC should be “unashamedly British” and that the practice would “send out a message that Britain is back” after Brexit. That evening, presenter Kirsty Wark ended the BBC program *Newsnight* by mentioning Rosindell’s call to be “unashamedly British” in broadcasting and then by announcing: “Well we’re not BBC One and it’s not quite the end of the day but we’re incredibly happy to oblige. Goodnight.” And then the credits rolled to the sights and sounds of a rendition of “God Save the Queen”—by the Sex Pistols. “God save the Queen,” Johnny Rotten roared, “The fascist regime . . .”<sup>5</sup> Brexit, “God Save the Queen,” and the Sex Pistols are all symbols. For Rosindell and many other Britons, Brexit was about national pride and self-determination. A vote for Brexit was a vote for Britain. “God Save the Queen” symbolizes not only Queen Elizabeth II, but all British royalty and the entire Empire. And the Sex Pistols: they had for a brief moment symbolized, depending on how one saw things, all that was wrong with British youth or a range of new possibilities for them. Ironically, the BBC had banned “God Save the Queen” from airplay when it was released in 1977, because it directly attacked the Queen and mocked the national anthem. And this explains why *Newsnight* on November 3, 2016, concluded with it. But the Queen has little more influence than the Sex Pistols on industry, trade, health care, and education. On the other hand, the English transportation system is essential not only to business and to travel but it also affects where and how people live, so it matters greatly to the whole way of life. Its symbolic value, however, is slight. No one would ever record “God Save the Channel Tunnel.”

In the case of science, Christians find it *symbolically* significant and *symbolically* challenging. Of course, science matters to the whole way of life today. It is basic to education and the economy, to agriculture and health care, to travel and communications. Modern life would be more than impossible without science; it would be inconceivable. But Christians rarely question this, and their practical lives—

at home, in school, on the job, at leisure—reflect a full embrace of science. No, the challenge is *symbolic*: “science” is the name for challenges to what Christians believe and teach about the origins and nature of the entire universe; about the origins and nature of human beings, including their minds, consciousness, the will, and moral responsibility; about good and evil and about life and death.

Illustrations abound, but the March 2017 issue of *The Lutheran Witness* (the official periodical of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod) about “When Science Meets Church” is both current and clear about science being challenging.

Emily Post would likely recommend that it’s best to relegate polite dinner conversation to safe topics like the weather or your grandson’s latest soccer game and to stay far, far away from more controversial issues like climate change, creation and evolution, and whether it was right for the Cincinnati Zoo staff to kill the gorilla Harambe.

But *The Lutheran Witness* is no Emily Post.

. . . The topics are substantial, making them all the more important to understand because, as Dr. John Warwick Montgomery explains, “A secular world desperately needs thinking, rational Christians.” So dig in! Discover something you didn’t know about God’s creation. Learn what genes and fossil fuels teach about your Creator. The guests at your next dinner party will thank you.<sup>6</sup>

All the topics dealt with in *The Lutheran Witness* issue, including climate change, creation and evolution, human uniqueness, genetics, and life and death, reflect concerns and challenges that Christians find science raising for them. This is *how* science is a cultural problem for Christians.

Once we recognize how, it is not hard to see *why*. Like science does today, the Western church once held cultural significance both symbolically and for the whole way of life. Indeed, its importance both in the symbolic sphere and for the way of life was greater than that which science holds today. During the long period of Christendom, the church was unchallenged in determining what people believed about the universe, about human beings and their lives, about good and evil, and about life and death. Moreover, throughout the Middle Ages and up to the dawn of the modern period, the Christian church was essential to the “practical, material mode of existence” of Western societies. Not only was the church vital to education, politics, and care of the poor and sick, it also controlled a great deal of land in Europe and so was economically significant. The church, as most know, was sometimes irresponsible (occasionally flagrantly so), but its importance was clearly unmatched for centuries.

This significance began to break down in the late Middle Ages and started to unravel completely after the Reformation. Today the church’s importance in

economies is negligible. Much of its land was expropriated long ago, and with colonization and then industrialization, land became economically much less significant in any case. The church's care for the sick and the poor is still valuable, but it depends to a large extent on modern science and technology. Accordingly and unsurprisingly, its influence on politics continues to wane.<sup>7</sup> New ideas and forms of civil politics did not rely on the approval of the church or depend upon traditional Christian doctrines. Both developments permanently curtailed the church's importance for the whole way of life. At the same time, new patterns of thought, independent of the church's expectations and authority, also arose, including political theory, political economy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, general hermeneutics, and modern natural science.

Science, to a greater extent than the others, has come to symbolize the end of the church's cultural significance. This is because science clearly breaks from the church in both method and content. In terms of method, the church relies on traditional authorities and strives to preserve traditional teachings, but science relies on experience and reason, and subjects all proposals to criticism through experiments. Science does not only learn from the world, but answers to the world. The church believes that the truth about heaven and earth and all things visible and invisible is found once and for all in and through Jesus Christ. Science believes that we can never arrive definitively at the truth, but that investigation, imagination, and testing will give us ever greater and more reliable knowledge. Science lacks the psychological certainty of faith and is limited by human capacities, but it does hold a confidence in knowing that one does not have to rely on someone else or on inner subjective experience. It has a different and higher degree of objectivity. Following its method, the content consists of a very different account about the world. For science, the universe itself reflects something other than what the church has said. Following the method and assumptions of science, heaven and earth and all that fill them lead us to think of them as products of natural conditions and processes, not as the work of a supernatural maker, and gives us an account of the origins, nature, prospects, and values of the universe very different from the one that the Christian faith has traditionally held.

Details fill out the picture. There may be several ways to select and organize these details, but E. A. Burtt's account is both helpful in unpacking the cultural significance and also theologically telling.<sup>8</sup>

Burtt observes that the premodern church and therefore premodern Western society had held that

man occupied a more significant and determinative place in the universe than the realm of physical nature, while for the main current of modern thought, nature holds a more independent, more determinative, and more permanent place than man. . . . Man, with

his hopes and ideals, was the all-important, even controlling fact in the universe.<sup>9</sup>

This anthropocentrism worked out in three ways. First, not only did the world “exist for man’s sake, but to be likewise immediately present and fully intelligible to his mind.”<sup>10</sup> The categories by which the world was understood derived from the senses: “substance, essence, matter, form, quality, quantity—categories developed in the attempt to throw into scientific form the facts and relations observed in man’s unaided sense-experience of the world and the main uses which he made it serve.”<sup>11</sup> Likewise, explanations and analogies were freely drawn from the idea of human purpose. In short, the physical explanations were Aristotelian. Second, the earth as the human dwelling place was assumed to be the center of the visible universe. “The whole universe was a small, finite place, and it was man’s place. He occupied the center; his good was the controlling end of the natural creation.”<sup>12</sup> Third, it was assumed that “the visible universe itself was infinitely smaller than the realm of man.”<sup>13</sup> The natural world existed for human creatures, but human creatures had been created for eternal fellowship with the Creator. Therefore “the whole natural world in its present form was but a moment in a great divine drama which reached over countless aeons past and present and in which man’s place was quite indestructible.”<sup>14</sup>

The world according to natural science turns this picture upside down. “Just as it was thoroughly natural for medieval thinkers to view nature as subservient to man’s knowledge, purpose, and destiny; so now it has become natural to view her as existing and operating in her own self-contained independence, and so far as man’s ultimate relation to her is clear at all, to consider his knowledge and purpose somehow produced by her, and his destiny wholly dependent on her.”<sup>15</sup> A different set of categories developed to analyze the world, and efficient causality supplanted teleology in explanations. The earth was no longer understood as the center of the visible universe. And the entire universe itself was understood to be without purpose and without meaning.

A reaction naturally ensued. A pronounced dualism arose between material and immaterial, between physical and spiritual. We see this most clearly in popular religion. Christians reflect this by stressing “Heaven Is My Home” and others in neopaganism. In more technical theological terms, this comes through in maintaining that human creatures are body *and* soul. But this dualism has also played out in philosophy, which has consisted, as Burt put it, “in large part a series of unsuccessful protests against the new view of the relation of man to nature. Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, James, Bergson—all are united in one earnest attempt, the attempt to reinstate man with his high spiritual claims in a place of importance in the cosmic scheme.”<sup>16</sup> *Unsuccessful* is the operative word here, and, as Hannah Arendt put it, “World alienation . . . has been the hallmark of the modern age.”<sup>17</sup> World alienation, in a completely unspiritual form, was described by Bertrand Russell in “A Free Man’s Worship,” one of his most widely known essays.

Amid such a world, if anywhere, our ideals henceforward must find a home. That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built. . . .

Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for Man, condemned to-day to lose his dearest, to-morrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day; disdaining the coward terrors of the slave of Fate, to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; undismayed by the empire of chance, to preserve a mind free from the wanton tyranny that rules his outward life; proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power.<sup>18</sup>

The Copernican Revolution is usually thought to be astronomical, and for the early Copernicans, including Kepler and Galileo, it was. The sun and the earth traded places in a universe otherwise still conceived of as a finite sphere. But, as Thomas Kuhn pointed out, "only tradition could supply a motive for doing so."<sup>19</sup> Soon that motive lost its force, and the radical philosophical, theological, and cultural challenges arose. In other words, the Copernican Revolution has been much more than astronomical. Other scientific developments have only made the challenges more urgent. The most important of these, at least in terms of cultural significance, has been Darwin's proposal of evolution by natural selection. Why? Because it offers a way to explain how we can understand together both the inorganic and the organic, the physical and the mental, in a single natural explanation. As Daniel Dennett explains,

In a single bold stroke it unites meaning with matter, two aspects of reality that appear to be worlds apart. On one side, we have the world of our minds and their meanings, our goals, our hopes, and our yearnings, and that most honored-and hackneyed-of all philosophical topics, the Meaning of Life. On the other side, we have galaxies ceaselessly wheeling, planets falling pointlessly into their orbits, lifeless chemical mechanisms doing what physics ordains, all without purpose or reason. Then Darwin comes along and shows us how the former arises from the latter, creating meaning as it goes a bubble-up vision of the birth of importance to overthrow the trickle-down vision of tradition.<sup>20</sup>

To be sure, evolution as Dennett understands it remains just an idea, not a fully worked out set of hypotheses.<sup>21</sup> In some cases, like the origins of life and consciousness, there are not even good suggestions, and perhaps never can be.<sup>22</sup> But the idea has been very successful in leading to specific explanations, and it remains fabulously audacious. So it is a key reason why science is a cultural problem for Christians.

### ***Some Implications for Christian Theology***

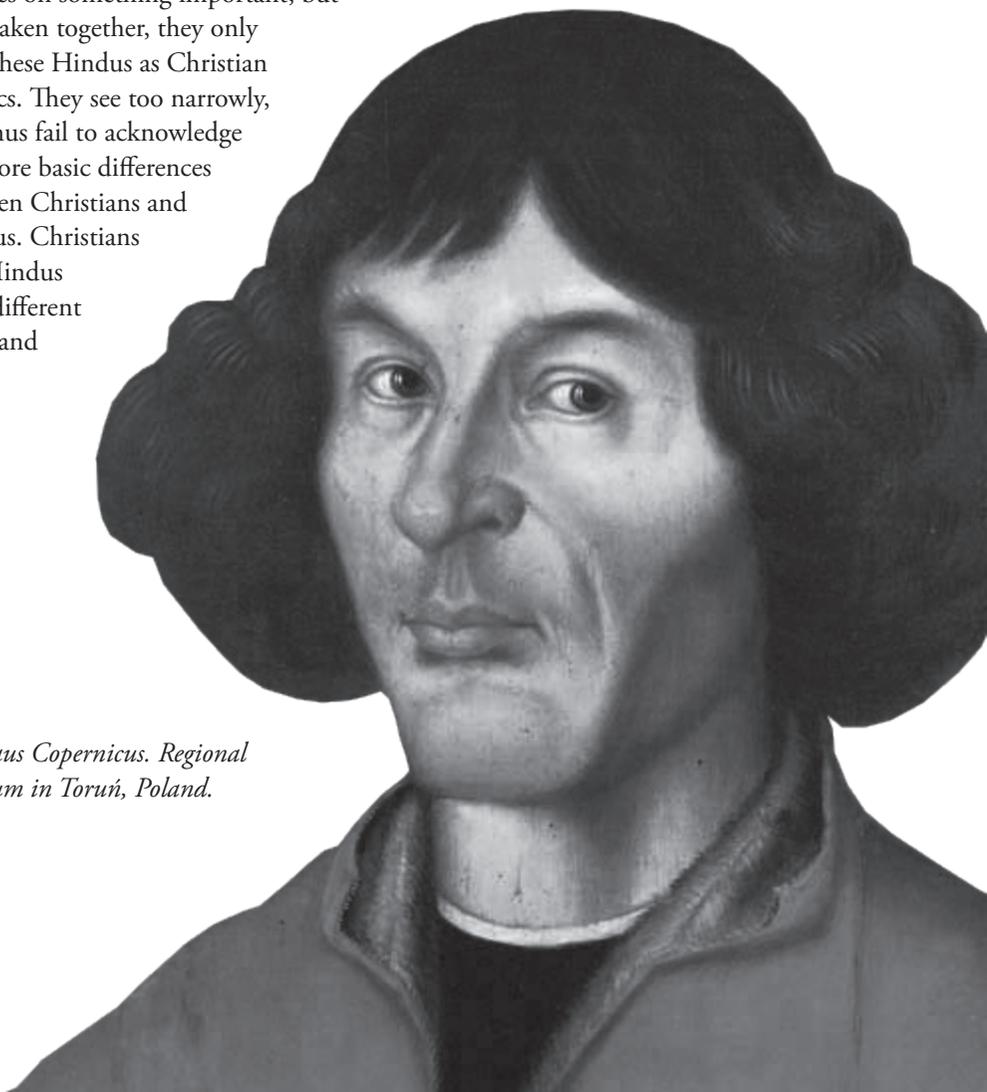
Contemporary cultural problems are messy affairs, and the cultural problems connected to science and the Christian faith have been no exception. Diagnosing questions, confusions, and challenges as cultural problems is messy, too. Furthermore it usually offers no clear, concrete paths toward resolution, but rather makes clear why such problems are likely to be interminable.<sup>23</sup>

But it does put the questions, confusions, and challenges into a wider perspective. Dealing with cultural problems is often made difficult because of the expectations that go with any important symbolic topic. What symbols stand for is taken for granted. This is the only way they can operate as symbols. But this also means that one will be inclined *not* to question that they actually stand for what they are supposed to stand for. This question is often effectively unthinkable.

I adverted to this difficulty in the introduction. The three passages I noted—Luke 19, Ephesians 2, and Isaiah 53—are symbolically important (at least in the circles in which I travel) for mission, faith, and understanding the significance of Christ's death. For each, I pointed out how it could not stand for what it was supposed to stand for. And I noted that I am not often engaged on these terms. I pose a challenge to symbols, and these challenges usually will not be thought through thoroughly. Someone could easily turn my words back on me: "I'm sure you do the same thing." I'm sure I do the same thing, too. We all do; we all must. All of us have to make assumptions and have to distinguish according to given rules. But we can ask ourselves about our assumptions and givens, and also how we can do better. In other words, remembering to think the unthinkable is vital when dealing with symbolic topics.

This applies as much to theology as any other task, and to science as much as any other topic. The advent of modern science and its influence on contemporary life means Christians should not take them for granted. Instead, they should ask how to talk about God and about all that he has made and plans to do in view of the questions, challenges, and alternatives raised by science. This is no different from what Christians should do when considering non-Christian religious communities. For example, some Hindus believe that Jesus Christ was God incarnate and made vicarious atonement for all people.<sup>24</sup> How should Christians think about this? Some propose that Christians stress differences between Hindu and Christian conceptions of incarnation. Others propose that Christians stress that believing *in* Jesus Christ is different for Hindus than for Christians. Still others propose that Christians stress that the Hindu doctrine of God is not Trinitarian. Each proposal touches on something important, but even taken together, they only treat these Hindus as Christian heretics. They see too narrowly, and thus fail to acknowledge the more basic differences between Christians and Hindus. Christians and Hindus have different gods, and

*Nicolaus Copernicus. Regional Museum in Toruń, Poland.*



they understand the universe and its relationship to God in radically different ways. The Hindu and Christian concepts of “incarnation” and “atonement” only make sense in their respective accounts of reality and human destiny, and they have little to do with each other. Christians have to remember to think such things. When they focus on the Big Bang or evolution, on whether human beings have souls or minds or consciousness, on trying to demonstrate the “real” nature of science, they run the risk of acting like those who focus on Hindu and Christian concepts of “incarnation” and “atonement” and ignore the bigger picture. Discussing science as a “cultural” problem is a way to bring the bigger picture into focus, to pull back, as it were, and see the situation from another standpoint.

Once the bigger picture comes into focus, several features stand out, features that treating only the symbols tends to hide. Here are three important theological ones.

## **Theology**

The first feature is theology itself. The bigger picture that Christians must work with when dealing with both world religions like Hinduism and science includes the entire account of God and creation. This does not mean merely that theology must deal with God and creation as a topic, but that we consider theology as talking about God and creation. In other words, Christian theology must be cosmological. All other topics—sin and grace, incarnation and salvation, justification and sanctification—should be derived from and discussed in this context, rather than be set alongside or above God and his creation.

In an important sense, there is nothing new about doing this. It is simply letting “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” stand. It is following through in theological method on the first article of the Creed: I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.<sup>25</sup> It is taking seriously that Christ was sent to announce and to establish the reign of God over creation. It is looking for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. But it is also no longer letting God as Creator and his creation lie in the background or at the margins for theology in favor of an agenda set by certain occasional intramural questions.<sup>26</sup> Instead, theology makes God creating all things the starting point for all reflection. What kind of person is God? The Creator. What is a human being? A creature of God the Creator. What is sin? Not acknowledging God and his rights as Creator. Why is justification by grace? Because God the Creator gets to justify as he pleases. What does it mean to believe in God? To freely let him be the Creator. And so on.

The point is not to teach something different, but rather to teach differently. All theology is occasional in the sense that it arises out of particular occasions. For example, the doctrine of justification as articulated in the Lutheran Confessions arose to deal with questions and confusions raised by medieval teaching and practice over the righteousness of sinners. Roman Catholic theology was not uniform, but it did uniformly maintain that righteousness before God was proper, that is, one’s

own. Evangelical theologians maintained that this righteousness was entirely alien, God's own. And it was this distinction that informed how the Lutheran Confessions formulated their doctrine of justification. As just noted, the "God and his creation" perspective on justification only reinforces that righteousness before God is entirely alien. Nothing changes in the article itself. But how and why it is stated does. Nothing different is taught, but it is taught differently.

Someone might question this move by observing that science is not radically comprehensive in the same way that the Christian faith is. Christians claim that God made all things visible and invisible, which should be taken to mean things outside the possibility of human discovery. Science limits itself to what can be observed or inferred from what can be observed. Moreover, it is not in the purview of science to answer such questions as "Why is there something rather than nothing?" Finally, science itself offers what purports to be the best possible explanation—right now. Concepts have been found useless, theories proven inadequate, and findings obviated in view of new discoveries.

These are noteworthy points, but science still aims to give an account of "all things visible." Working on its own terms modern science has arrived at a very different explanation of the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. Modern science has grown so large and involved that no one person can have a close grasp of it all; very few can have a working acquaintance with a large portion; and most are involved in a specialized aspect. Nevertheless, science does aim to be comprehensive and coherent, and Christian theology should also.

### **Knowledge and Truth**

When speaking of God and creation, it is essential to understand and proceed properly. Christians should not be understood fundamentally as people who have discovered something vital or ultimate. Christianity is not primarily a human achievement in the same way that science is. Science is like Greek philosophy and Vedantic Hinduism. Both the Greeks and the Indians claim to have discerned something beyond what they see and experience ("the Good" and "Brahman"), and they lead others to do the same.

But if Christianity is not a human achievement, then how do Christians come by their message, their beliefs, their practices? They hold that these all come through their God. Traditionally minded Christians usually explain this by referring to the Bible as God's word. But how do you know the Bible is the word of God? How do you know what it means? How do you know that what it says applies to us or our questions? These are vital questions, and Christians should not answer them or rely on hand waving answers like "inspiration" and "perspicuity." Biblical inspiration and clarity are indeed true and right positions for Christians, but in this situation they do not work.

Everything depends on knowing God and his word and work. Christians come

by this God and believe in him because God has come *to them*. Christians are people who claim to have been engaged by someone, namely the Creator of the universe. The story of Israel is the story of a people whom this God engaged and called to be his own. The story of Jesus and the Christian church is the continuation and the fulfillment of this story. In other words, Christians are Christians not because they have relied on what they could discern about God but because God came to them in and through the man Jesus. This is what Christians mean when they confess Jesus as the Son of God and the Word of God and the Image of God. They acknowledge that God comes to the world through this man. They hold that Jesus is God present, speaking, and acting. When you see Jesus, you behold God; when you hear Jesus, you hear God. Jesus is not simply a prophet or teacher, but God's own Son, God's own Word, God's own Image. As the evangelist John said: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth . . . No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known (Jn 1:14ff).

Of course, these are not only tremendous claims but also ones hard to take seriously, especially when the one claiming them is just an "ordinary guy." After all, we are talking about Jesus of Nazareth. One prospective follower would say, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Others would say, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" But Jesus insisted. He would not go quietly. So, as John puts it, "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him." He was rejected and eventually he was arrested and crucified as a criminal. As he was dying, his opponents mocked him: "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Lk 23:37).

But Jesus's identity as the Son of God, as the Word made flesh, as the Image of the invisible God, was vindicated when God raised him from the dead. As the Risen One, Jesus commissioned his followers to proclaim him and his mission to the world. This is just what they did, and what their successors have been doing ever since. As they have done so, they have left behind testimonies of many kinds, including the writings we call the "New Testament," and they have shown us how to interpret their message (and the message of the Old Testament) and apply it to ourselves. The creeds and confessions testify to this message and to the right way to interpret and apply it.

None of this has direct bearing on questions raised by science, but all of this informs what faithful responses must look like. Moreover, and more importantly, all of this informs how the church should live in all ages.

## Theology and Science

Still we are left with asking about the relationship between the traditional testimony and expectations of the church on the one hand and modern science on the other. The most vexing problem is whether the two can be reconciled.

There are two aspects to this problem. The first is whether “traditional” testimony and expectations of the church are authentically Christian. To the extent that Burt’s account about the premodern views on the universe is correct, we must judge that the church has had a seriously flawed understanding. The idea that the universe is centered on human capacities and sustains human aspirations and hopes is idolatrous. The Scriptures testify that the universe and God as its creator stand far outside human imagination and skill, and this fact is awesome. The psalmist said, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” (Ps 8:3–4). And the Lord said to Job: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone” (Job 38:4–6).

Christians must acknowledge God as the Creator by recognizing that it ultimately answers to him and him alone, and that God answers to no one. This is part of what Christians mean when they confess creation *ex nihilo*—out of nothing—and acknowledge God as absolute—absolved of all responsibility.<sup>27</sup> Of course, this is very difficult. This is why the doctrine of election, the question of the cause of sin, and the problem of evil are so hard. But God’s Godness must be maintained. Like Job, we must fear God for nothing.

This helps us to deal with the second aspect of the problem: In what ways can Christians accept the procedures and findings of science? Everyone agrees that science is appropriate and good in many particular situations: to discover new drugs, relieve pollution, produce more food, and improve technology. But science isn’t just for the local and particular; it seeks to understand and explain the world. And so the same science gives rise to the Big Bang theory, the strangeness of quantum mechanics, theories of evolution, and the explanations of the neurosciences. So how are Christians to regard science? How, if at all, can science be reconciled with the Christian faith?

We have this question because the universe, as science currently proposes, seems to be *autonomous*. The universe, as science shows and explains, goes on its own. It does not need anyone or anything outside of it to keep things running. It runs according

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human imagination and skill,  
and this fact is awesome.*

to its own rules—natural laws. It serves no apparent purpose, more like a lot of contemporary art, literature, and sport than most of the machines we make and use. No god, no conscious and very powerful being, is needed to understand or explain how things go. To be sure, science cannot answer the big why questions, like “Why is there a universe at all?” or “Why does it work so well?” And, despite the confidence often expressed about scientific explanations and positions, there are still huge gaps in understanding (e.g., scientific explanations about the origin of life and about consciousness). Nevertheless, everyday experience justifies it. We are used to thinking the universe autonomous and usually think nothing of it. To see this, consider cooking. Like physics, chemistry, and biology, cooking assumes that everything is made of basic ingredients and that everything follows law-like rules. Cooking is mastered by knowing your ingredients and understanding what heat and cold, salt and sour, drying and soaking, stirring and beating will do. You get these down and can prepare all sorts of meals. Cooking has its own autonomy. What modern science has long assumed is that much, if not all, of the universe has its own autonomy.

The idea that the universe as it appears to us is autonomous has long been a sticking point for theists, because it takes God, as it were, out of the equation. Famously this was a problem for Isaac Newton and his original followers. Gottfried Leibniz (a Lutheran, by the way) criticized Newton’s position as not only confused but theologically unworthy. It was confused because Newton refused to accept the conclusion to which his own mathematics led. It was theologically unworthy because he made God look stupid:

Newton and his followers also have a very odd opinion regarding God’s workmanship. According to them,

God’s watch—the universe—would stop working if he didn’t re-wind it from time to time! He didn’t have enough foresight to give it perpetual motion. This machine that he has made is so imperfect that from time to time he has to clean it by a miraculous intervention, and even has to mend it, as a clockmaker mends his work.<sup>28</sup>

Samuel Clarke, who like Newton was probably an Arian, defended Newton by saying, on the one hand, that God’s intervention reflected his glory, not detracted from it, and, on the other hand, condemning Leibniz’s position as materialism and fatalism and as a denial of divine providence:

So the fact that nothing happens without his continual regulation and oversight is a true glory of his workmanship and not something that detracts from it. The idea that the world is a great machine that goes on without intervention by God, like a clock ticking along

without help from a clockmaker—that’s the idea of materialism and fate. Under cover of declaring God to be a supra-mundane intelligence, it aims to exclude providence and God’s government from the world.<sup>29</sup>

But Leibniz upheld both the autonomy reflected by Newton’s mechanics and God’s providence. He replied that one should distinguish the mathematical principles of philosophy, in our parlance, science, from the metaphysical principles. The two did not necessarily have anything to do with each other. Both materialists and Christians, who believed in the immaterial, agreed on mathematical principles. “Wherefore, not mathematical principles (according to the usual sense of that word) but metaphysical principles ought to be opposed to those of the materialists.”<sup>30</sup> Metaphysical principles are answers to questions like, “Why is there something and not nothing?” Materialists stop with the matter of the universe itself; matter is absolute, but Christians argue that the answer is God the Creator.

In our time, both materialists and proponents of intelligent design agree that if one grants that the universe appears to be autonomous, that it has its own integrity, that it seems to follow its own rules and go its own way, then one must conclude that either God is not involved or that God does not exist at all. Contemporary materialists like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, from whom we heard earlier, will point to the way science offers comprehensive explanations of the universe and conclude that God is not only unnecessary for understanding the universe, but unnecessary altogether. Proponents of intelligent design agree with this logic but not the conclusion. Therefore they assume that God as Creator must be evident from understanding the universe on its own terms.

From the Christian standpoint, the problem is idolatry. It makes God over according to the imagination and desires of human beings. It does not let God be God. It confines God to mathematical principles, not to his own being and revelation.

So what modern science calls on Christians to consider is that the universe has a *relative autonomy*. It is *autonomous* in that God need not be considered to understand how things go in the world, but it is *relative* to the conviction that God made and governs all things.

Moreover, the idea that the universe has a relative autonomy is consistent with the traditional doctrine of divine providence. God’s relationship to the universe is, once again, absolute. This means that he is active in and through all created or second causes. As Francis Pieper explained:

The *causae secundae* (second causes) are the means through which divine Providence operates. God operates, and the means operate. Ps. 127:1: The Lord builds the house, and the builders build the house. But the relation between the operation of the means and

the operation of God is this: The operation of the means is not coordinate with the operation of God, but subordinate to it, and subordinate to that extent that the means work only that which God works through them, and they work only as long as God works. For “except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.”

We speak indeed of the natural constitution, movement, power, and working of the creature. But what the creatures do naturally, e.g., that the worm crawls, man walks, the sun shines . . . they do because of God’s influence on the creatures.<sup>31</sup>

For nature, this means that its operation is not separate from God’s will and work, but that it is God’s will and work. “The so-called ‘laws of nature’ are not something which differ from God’s will and operation, but are God’s will and operation itself in its relation to the existence and operation of the creatures.”<sup>32</sup>

Divine providence is taught to stress God’s sovereignty, but the doctrine does affirm that the second causes and the laws of nature do indeed operate. God’s operation is such that created causes work freely or “naturally, e.g., that the worm crawls, man walks, the sun shines.” They have, relative to other creatures, their own integrity or autonomy.

The Augsburg Confession affirms this specifically in the case of human creatures:

We confess that there is a free will in all human beings. For all have a natural, innate mind and reason—not that they can act in matters pertaining to God, such as loving or fearing God with their whole heart—but they do have the freedom to choose good or evil only in the external works of this life. By “good” I mean what can be done by nature. . . . To be sure, all of this neither exists nor endures without God, but everything is from him and through him. On the other hand, a human being can by personal choice do evil, such as to kneel before an idol, commit murder, and the like.<sup>33</sup>

Theologically, this means that there is no inherent theological difficulty in concluding that the universe does not give any definite indications of divine activity or intervention or any clear signs of purpose or meaning. This is because the doctrine of divine providence, or *creatio continua*, understands that God’s activity, while complete and absolute, is also incomprehensible. It is not like causation in the created realm, where one thing causes another. As William Placher explained:

God did make and does sustain me. . . . Thus divine shaping of my will is not an interference in the natural order; it is the natural order. . . . God makes me—in a way that involves a whole chain of secondary causes but is also, in a different way, fully the action

of God—someone with certain desires and inclinations. Through another set of secondary causes, but again also fully through divine action, God creates the pattern of external stimuli to which my desires and inclinations respond. All along, God is sustaining me as the being I am. Still, as I consider my options and choose according to my desires, I am acting voluntarily, and in relation to my acts of will as in other cases the way God “makes” or “creates” is so unlike other cases of such activities that I cannot understand it.”<sup>34</sup>

The upshot for Christians and science is that science has a theologically justified place in human endeavors. To be sure, for Christians its assumptions, procedures, and conclusions always should be subject to the confession of God as Creator and to his word (against an absolute critical stance). Put another way, the universe has a relative autonomy, and so science’s integrity for Christians is always relative to God’s own authority.

### **Conclusion**

I have identified and explained science as a cultural problem for contemporary Christians, and explored some implications for theology. What still needs to be said is that these theological implications should be worked out primarily in preaching, teaching, and worship, not mainly in lectures, journals, and conferences. If science is a cultural problem, then treating it strictly or primarily as an academic problem, or ignoring it altogether, is irresponsible and counterproductive. We have to regard these theological implications as matters of “living theology,” the theology embodied in sermons and devotions, in catechism classes and Sunday school, in songs and prayers.

Some will find this call threatening. If the life and witness of the church largely consists of platitudes and propositions, then it *is* threatening. But trading on platitudes and propositions allowed science to become a cultural problem for the church in the first place, along with sexuality, life issues, the environment, and atheism. It also contributed to the confusions and errors about mission, faith, and the crucifixion observed in the introduction. So there is nothing to lose by turning attention toward the theology in our life and witness, but a great deal to be gained.

*If science is a cultural problem, then treating it as an academic problem, or ignoring it altogether, is irresponsible and counterproductive.*

## Endnotes

- 1 T. S. Eliot, *Notes toward a Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company 1949), 30.
- 2 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780–1950*, with a new introduction (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 234.
- 3 Terry Eagleton, *Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 4.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/03/tory-mp-calls-for-bbc-1-to-mark-brexite-with-national-anthem-at-t/>. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/04/bbc-mock-tory-mp-over-call-to-play-national-anthem/>.
- 6 Adrienne Heins, “To the Reader,” *Lutheran Witness*, 136:3 (March 2017): 2.
- 7 There are, to be sure, other relevant political factors.
- 8 E. A. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, 2nd rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954). See also Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957); Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought*, foreword by James Bryant Conant (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1957), esp. chapters 1 and 7; and Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed., introduction by Margaret Canovan (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), esp. chapter VI.
- 9 Burtt, *Metaphysical Foundations*, 17–18.
- 10 Ibid., 18.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid., 19.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid., 20. Burtt illustrated this picture with selections from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.
- 15 Ibid., 24.
- 16 Ibid., 25.
- 17 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 254.
- 18 Bertrand Russell, “A Free Man’s Worship,” in *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays* (New York: Longman, Green and Co., 1919), 47–48, 56–57. Burtt quoted these passages on 23.
- 19 Kuhn, *Copernican Revolution*, 231.
- 20 Daniel C. Dennett, *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 201. Dennett regards this as “the single best idea anybody ever had” (also 201). See also Daniel C. Dennett, “Darwin’s Strange Inversion of Reasoning,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106/Supplement 1 (2009): 10061–10065, which explains how Darwin’s idea “unites meaning with matter.”
- 21 But “evolution” is another word with more than one common meaning.
- 22 For an example of argument why it will never be worked out, see Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 23 See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), who explains how and why moral disagreements over such topics as abortion are interminable. See also chapter four of Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Here Rorty discusses the “final vocabulary.” These are words with which a person can go no further; cast doubt on them and “there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force” (73).
- 24 See Vivekananda, “Christ the Messenger,” in Paul J. Griffiths, ed., *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 213–214.
- 25 And the second and third articles are, accordingly, second and third. They follow and flow out of the first.
- 26 For all who think that justification would no longer be central, remember that God being God and all the rest being his creatures forces the question of justification and demands that justification be solely by his grace. For all who think that sin would be marginalized, remember that knowing God is God is a direct attack on the Original Sinner who wants to be God. And so on. The other articles of the Christian faith

unfold naturally and logically from this, a naturalness and logic that are missing when one lets the occasional questions structure one's thought.

- 27 The point about creation *ex nihilo* was nicely put by Terry Eagleton in *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 8.

[God] made it as gift, superfluity, and gratuitous gesture—out of nothing rather than out of grim necessity. In fact for Christian theology there is no necessity to the world at all. . . . He created it out of love, not need. There was nothing in it for him. The Creation is the original *acte gratuit*. The doctrine that the world was made out of nothing is meant to alert us to the mind-blowing contingency of the cosmos—the fact that like a modernist work of art it might just as well never have happened, and like most thoughtful men and women is perpetually overshadowed by the possibility of its own nonexistence. Creation “out of nothing” is not testimony to how devilishly clever God is, dispensing as he can with even the most rudimentary raw materials, but to the fact that the world is not the inevitable culmination of some prior process, the upshot of some inexorable chain of cause and effect . . .

The point about God as absolute was made by Gerhard Forde in “Absolution: Systematic Considerations,” in *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*, ed. by Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 153–155.

- 28 G. W. Leibniz, “Leibniz’s First Paper,” in Samuel Clarke, D. D., *A Collection of Papers which passed between the late Learned Mr. Leibnitz [sic] and Dr. Clarke in the years 1715 and 1716 concerning the Principles of Natural Philosophy and Religion* (London: James Knapton, 1717; reprinted Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956), 11.
- 29 Ibid., 14.
- 30 Ibid., 15.
- 31 Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 487.
- 32 Ibid., 489.
- 33 AC XVII.4–6 (Kolb-Wengert ed., 52).
- 34 William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 120.

# The Age of the Earth and Confessional Lutheranism

## Speaking the Truth in Love

John Jurchen



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Questions regarding the age of the earth have captured a great deal of attention in the United States. We have seen a rise in organizations, such as the Creation Research Society (CRS), the Institute for Creation Research (ICR), and Answers in Genesis (AIG), that

actively promote a perspective that the earth was created by God several thousand years ago in the course of six, twenty-four-hour days. These organizations have conducted research,<sup>1</sup> sponsored debates,<sup>2</sup> and listed specific colleges and universities that endorse their perspective that in general is referred to as *young-earth creationism*.<sup>3</sup> Young-earth creationism has also been an important perspective for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). Six of the eighteen founding members of the CRS hold membership in LCMS congregations,<sup>4</sup> and LCMS members have authored a number of books supporting young-earth creationism.<sup>5</sup> Recently, faculty serving in the Concordia University System have organized their own Society of Creation<sup>6</sup> that works closely with the CRS and AIG. The partnership between the LCMS and the CRS is strong; Concordia University Ann Arbor hosted the 2016 CRS conference.<sup>7</sup>

Even with such clear support for a young-earth creation perspective within the LCMS, questions regarding the age of the earth still trouble many who sit in our pews or attend classes in our elementary schools, high schools, and colleges. The following excerpts are from a letter sent to the faculty in the natural sciences at Concordia University Nebraska, from an LCMS member. They illustrate the general unease that many of our parishioners experience concerning the subject.

The parishioner began by saying that he has recently come to the LCMS from

a different Lutheran denomination and has received great comfort in the transition. He then writes:

I now find myself agreeing that confessional Lutheranism is the truest expression of Christianity that I have ever heard. That being said, my one hang up in this transition has been the biblical creation account, specifically, the idea that it points to an Earth and universe that is only 6,000–10,000 years old. I have a scientifically inclined mind, so I am hoping that you can point me to some resources that would help explain any current science that may support the biblical view of creation. . . . I have really come to think that the Young Earth interpretation of Genesis is simply less ad hoc than any Old Earth interpretation, and I agree that we should always let the authority of scripture interpret the world we live in and not let science interpret scripture.

The parishioner is clearly a thoughtful person earnestly struggling with these issues. His letter, too long to include here in its entirety, indicates his familiarity with the general literature surrounding the subject and notes that he carefully read the LCMS 2015 report *In Christ All Things Hold Together*.<sup>8</sup> He concluded with some other revealing points:

I feel this is an extremely important issue for many reasons, but one main one is that, as the LCMS even teaches, the Bible and ultimate scientific truth should not contradict one another.<sup>9</sup> What God has revealed to us in his word should also be true in his creation. . . . However, all the science that I know of still does point us toward a very old age for the Earth and universe, and this is an inference that seems to contradict the Bible. . . . I am hoping that as a successful scientist, who also embraces confessional Lutheranism, you would be so kind as to point me to some resources that may help clarify this apparent contradiction between modern science and the Bible.

Many pastors and teachers in the LCMS have undoubtedly received letters or had conversations with parishioners or students expressing the same sentiments. Those who haven't had such a communication could probably imagine it. How does one address such a parishioner or student? Is there room in the LCMS for someone who loves confessional Lutheranism, holds to the inerrancy of scripture, and yet continues to struggle with the age of the earth? Members of the many other denominations represented within our schools also wrestle with being Christians in a secular, scientific world. The approach that has proved most fruitful in my experience is both simple and powerful: the vocation of teaching.

## ***The Age of the Earth and Various Christian Denominations***

Many denominations, including the LCMS, have clearer teachings and resolutions regarding evolution than the age of the earth. Thus, it is useful to divide the several denominations into two categories: those who specifically reject Darwinian evolution, (here defined as the origin of all species both present and extinct from a common ancestor through a process of mutation and natural selection), and those who do not. Denominations that do not reject Darwinian evolution do not necessarily endorse it, but are willing to state that their official doctrine is not necessarily opposed to it. Any denomination that does not reject Darwinian evolution will likewise *not* reject the standard geological time scale measured in billions of years, as “deep time”<sup>10</sup> is deemed necessary for Darwinian evolution.

Many students who attend our schools, particularly those with an evangelical background, automatically assume that Christian churches by-and-large adhere to a young-earth creation perspective. This is not the case. Some Christian denominations simply state that Darwinian evolution is not incompatible with their doctrine. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church, as early as 1950, was open to the consideration of evolutionary theory:

The Teaching Authority of the Church does not forbid that, in conformity with the present state of human sciences and sacred theology, research and discussions, on the part of men experienced in both fields, take place with regard to the doctrine of evolution, in as far as it inquires into the origin of the human body as coming from pre-existent and living matter—for the Catholic faith obliges us to hold that souls are immediately created by God.”<sup>11</sup>

Here Pope Pius XII is primarily concerned with the special creation of human souls, regardless of the origin of the human body. More recently, Pope John-Paul II reiterated the 1950 encyclical clarifying some of its primary points:

My predecessor Pius XII had already stated that there was no opposition between evolution and the doctrine of faith about man and his vocation, on condition that one did not lose sight of several indisputable points . . . theories of evolution which, in accordance with the philosophies inspiring them, consider the mind as emerging from the forces of living matter, or as a mere epiphenomenon of this matter, are incompatible with the truth about man.<sup>12</sup>

Other Christian denominations go further, and support Darwinian evolution and the billion-year-old earth that necessarily accompanies it. For instance, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) reaffirmed in their 2002 General Assembly that



*Earthrise. In this composite image captured by NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter we see Earth appear to rise over the lunar horizon.*

“there is no contradiction between an evolutionary theory of human origins and the doctrine of God as Creator.”<sup>13</sup>

And the Episcopal Church readily embraces Darwinian evolution as was resolved in their General Convention, 2006:

That the theory of evolution provides a fruitful and unifying scientific explanation for the emergence of life on earth, that many theological interpretations of origins can readily embrace an evolutionary outlook, and that an acceptance of evolution is entirely compatible with an authentic and living Christian faith.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the Episcopal Church's General Convention resolved "that Episcopalians strongly encourage state legislatures and state and local boards of education to establish standards for science education based on the best available scientific knowledge as accepted by a consensus of the scientific community."

These examples represent other Christian denominations that have openly stated that Darwinian evolution (and a several billion-year-old earth that necessarily accompanies it) is compatible with their official doctrine. The Episcopal Church's resolution exemplifies a *Christ of Culture* approach to the relationship between theology and science. This is cautioned against in the recent LCMS document "In Christ All Things Hold Together" and is explained as an approach in which "faith must simply be modified so that it is compatible with what any widely accepted scientific theory claims."<sup>15</sup>

### ***An Alternative Approach: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod***

In contrast to the Christ of Culture approach represented in the official doctrinal statements of the Episcopal Church and other Christian denominations, the parishioner who wrote the letter discovered in the LCMS, a church which teaches careful exegetical practices in order to rightly handle the word of truth (2 Tm 2:15). The LCMS reliance on the unchanging word of God does not mean that issues surrounding the age of the earth have been ignored. The relationship between Christian theology and science has been revisited numerous times through debates, publications, conferences, CTCR reports, and convention resolutions from 1932 to 2016 and will doubtless continue to be an important area for the LCMS in the future.

The result of the debates, publications, conferences, and CTCR reports has led to resolutions quite different from those of our brothers and sisters in the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches. For instance, in the consideration of the role of Darwinian evolution in the development of life, the LCMS proposed Resolution 2-08A "To Commend Preaching and Teaching Creation" which was adopted at the 2004 LCMS Convention. It states the following:

Whereas, The Scriptures teach that God is the creator of all that exists and is therefore the Author and Giver of Life: and

Whereas, The hypotheses of macro, organic, and Darwinian evolution, including theistic evolution or any other model denying special, immediate, and miraculous creation, undercut this support for the honoring of life as a gift of God...

Resolved, That the Synod's educational agencies and institutions properly distinguish between micro- and macroevolution and affirm the scriptural revelation that God has created all species "according to their kinds."<sup>16</sup>

In the twelve years since Resolution 2-08A was adopted, LCMS theologians have continued to study the biblical text to more clearly annunciate the relationship between theology and science. For example, in its most recent 2016 Convention, the LCMS adopted Resolution 14-05, “To Commend *In Christ All Things Hold Together: The Intersection of Science and Christian Theology*,” which is the same CTCR report in which the concerned parishioner mentioned earlier expressed such delight. The CTCR report states that “when Genesis speaks of God creating plants, trees, and land creatures according to their *kind*, it cannot automatically be assumed that ‘kind’ lines up neatly with the taxonomical categories recognized by modern biology.”<sup>17</sup>

While the 2015 CTCR report would seem to suggest that the biblical word *kind* in the 2004 Resolution 2-08A may not necessarily translate immediately to the taxonomical category *species*, the intent of Resolution 2-08A remains the same. Our LCMS treatments are not restricted to the confines of Darwinian evolution. God was free to create life as he saw fit and did so as indicated in the Holy Scripture.

Clearly, the approach taken by the LCMS regarding the role of Darwinian evolution differs significantly from many other Christian denominations. When *macroevolution*, as stated in the 2-08A resolution, is not a theological requirement, an accompanying several-billion-year geological time scale is not a necessity. A consideration of geological time becomes a question open for debate and discussion.

### ***The Age of the Earth and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod***

So what is the official position of the age of the earth within the LCMS? This is of such importance to our parishioners and students that it is the very first question listed in the *LCMS Frequently Asked Questions: LCMS Views—The Bible* found on the LCMS website. A parishioner struggling with the age of the earth would find the answer to be gracious:

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod does not have an official position on the precise “age of the earth,” since the Bible itself does not tell us how old the earth is. Nor is it the Synod’s position that everything in the Bible is to be understood “literally.” There is much in the Bible that clearly purports not to be understood literally—but this must be determined by the Bible itself, not by science or human reason. There is nothing in the Bible itself to suggest that the creation account is not meant to be taken literally.<sup>18</sup>

Why is calculating a “precise” age of the earth a challenge? One of the issues related to the arithmetic is the variance in the source documents used for our modern English translations of the Old Testament. The received Masoretic text, on which the English translations of the Old Testament are based, and the Septuagint, widely cited by the apostles and evangelists, agree on important theological points. However, in the genealogies of the patriarchs there is a difference of several hundred years, and

these are often at variance with other ancient manuscripts.<sup>19</sup> These are not errors. It was common practice to skip one or more generations in genealogical lists. However, it does make reconciling the documents problematic. We cannot calculate the precise age of the earth based on the biblical source texts. It appears that the Holy Spirit does not intend for us to be able to do so. Perhaps the Spirit has other work for us to do.

The several LCMS resolutions and CTCR reports adopted and published over the years have deliberately focused on what we can know from Scripture. An early resolution related to the age of the earth was the adoption in 1932 of *A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod*. In it, we see the kernel of the historical preference for young-earth creation within the LCMS:

We teach that God has created heaven and earth, and that in the manner and in the space of time recorded in the Holy Scriptures, especially Genesis 1 and 2, namely, by His almighty creative word, and in six days. We reject every doctrine which denies or limits the work of creation as taught in Scripture. In our days it is denied or limited by those who assert, ostensibly in deference to science, that the world came into existence through a process of evolution; that is, that it has, in immense periods of time, developed more or less of itself.<sup>20</sup>

The language of *A Brief Statement* has been of benefit to the LCMS through many decades and was reaffirmed in Resolution 2-31 at the 1967 Convention where it was expanded to affirm the historicity of Adam and Eve, the fall, and the “subsequent inherent corruption of all human beings.” In its turn, Resolution 2-31 was examined and explained in the CTCR document *Creation in Biblical Perspective*<sup>21</sup> that was received by the Synod in Resolution 2-12 of the 1971 Convention and was commended to its membership for reference and guidance. While the application and scope of these statements increased with each iteration, the underlying theology did not as each was rooted in the unchanging word of God. The theology and approach to scripture in these resolutions and adopted studies remained the core of the 2015 CTCR report *In Christ All Things Hold Together*.

These resolutions and adopted documents collectively focus on creation by the word of God, in six days, through a series of creative acts, the historicity of Adam and Eve, their fall into sin, and God’s redemptive work as taught in the Gospels. It is important to note that in none of the official doctrinal resolutions or statements is the creation week defined as six, twenty-four-hour periods, a distinction highlighted by the CTCR itself.<sup>22</sup> Adherence to a young-earth creation perspective of six, twenty-four-hour days may be a historic position of the LCMS, as presented by the Society of Creation; however, for individuals struggling to reconcile faith in the God of Genesis with what is read in literature or heard in the media, six, twenty-four-hour days is not a requirement. As long as parishioners are able to accept the historicity of Adam

and Eve, the corrupting influence of sin, and the gospel of salvation, they can expand the days of the creation week to encompass unspecified periods. We can wrestle with these issues, even as we keep in mind that God is not limited in his creative work.

### **Speaking the Truth in Love**

*Old-earth creation* (or *day-age creation*) refers to the general perspective in which the six days of creation are expanded to include geological times scales, typically of hundreds of millions to billions of years, during which God periodically intervened in creative acts. It has been developed and publicized by a number of authors<sup>23</sup> and bears some resemblance to a perspective referred to as *intelligent design*<sup>24</sup> insofar as both require the intervention of an intelligent agent to account for biological discontinuity<sup>25</sup> in nature. Both intelligent design and old-earth creation deny the ability of biological evolution to bring forth the great variety of living creatures from a common ancestor, but old-earth creation goes a step further and posits that God worked actively throughout his creation. Formulations of old-earth creation generally have a high regard for the historicity of Scripture, accept a recent creation of man and his fall, and hold to a Noachian flood, (though these formulations differ in their scope and extent).

An old-earth creation perspective can offer some latitude for LCMS members who hold to the Lutheran confessions and yet struggle with a young-earth creation approach. For instance, old-earth creation was the overall perspective of the parishioner highlighted at the beginning of this article. Adherents can accept the standard, secular interpretation of the geological record while still holding to an exegetically credible six-day (*yom*) creation, the fall of an historical Adam and Eve, and redemption through Jesus Christ.

While an old-earth creation perspective as described above, formulated to be in accord with sacred Scripture, may not be contrary to the specific wording of the Lutheran Confessions and the several resolutions and CTCR documents, speaking “the truth in love” requires that pastors and teachers go beyond providing a comfortable approach and present as complete a representation of old-earth creation as possible. The vocation of teaching calls us to do so. A number of important implications arise from an adherence to an old-earth creation perspective.<sup>26</sup> Two of the most significant implications in my experience teaching at an LCMS university have been the extent of the Noachian flood and the “effect of the fall on the natural economy”; additional detail regarding these terms is explained elsewhere.<sup>27</sup>

Old-earth creationists differ as to the size and extent of the Noachian flood but follow an approach that assumes the standard geological time scale. The concept of a “global” flood is typically understood to encompass the destruction of all humanity with the exception of the eight people who were saved in the ark and the creatures that God gave them to protect.<sup>28</sup> In support of this viewpoint, the statement “all high mountains under the whole heaven were covered” (Gn 7: 19) with respect

to the Noachian flood is taken in the same sense as “all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth” (Gn 41:57). In explanation: in the same way that biblical exegesis has never required that supplicants from India and China came to Joseph for grain, adherents to an old-earth creation approach would contend that a flood covering “all high mountains under the whole heaven” could also be a regional event. This difference is a key point of *geological* distinction in the biblical interpretations of the Noachian flood between the old-earth creationism and publications from the CRS and other groups working in support of young-earth creation.

A key point of *theological* distinction between old- and young-earth creation is the “effect of the fall on the natural economy.” What were the immediate and long-term effects of Adam and Eve’s sin? Young-earth creationists generally consider that the effects of the fall were catastrophic to the whole world order leading to animal death, “thorns and thistles” and perhaps carnivorous diets and parasitism. An old-earth perspective follows the geological time scale as generally recognized by secular geologists. This carries with it the associated fossil record and the expectation that myriads of organisms lived and died in the ages that constitute the creation week and predated the sin of Adam. Is animal death before the fall compatible with LCMS theology? Here also, the various synodical resolutions and CTCR reports stay true to the word of God, accurately stating only what can be known from the Scriptures. For instance, in the CTCR report *Creation in Biblical Perspective*, received by the LCMS in convention in 1971, interprets St. Paul’s statement in Roman’s 5 in the following manner:

The end of Adam is described in starkly simple words: “And he died (Gn 5:5). Scripture speaks of sin as the real cause of the death of men. “As sin came into the world through one man and death through sin . . . so death spread to all men because all men sinned.” (Rom 5:12)<sup>29</sup>

The adopted resolutions have otherwise been silent with respect to animal death before the fall. As the answer cannot be known from Scripture, the LCMS has remained true to its adherence to sola scriptura and has not codified in convention the principle that animal death is a direct consequence of the sin of Adam.

## **Conclusion**

So, is there a place in the LCMS for parishioners and students who hold to the doctrine of creation, love the Lutheran Confessions, cling to the inspired, inerrant word of God, acknowledge the historicity of the Old Testament, yet continue to struggle with the age of the earth? As noted on the LCMS website, we cannot calculate the exact age of the earth from Scripture. The most significant geological and theological consequences of old-earth creation, though not synonymous with the young-earth creation perspective of some in the LCMS, are not in direct

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contradiction with its resolutions and reports. In such a case, the proper response would seem to be to engage the topic with discussion, research, conferences, reports, and publications. And this indeed has been the practice of the LCMS from the adoption of *A Brief Statement* in 1932 through the foundation of the CRS in 1963, to the acceptance of the CTCR document

*In Christ all Things Hold Together* at the 2015 Synodical Conference. In reality, there is no better denomination for those who, like the author of the letter cited at the beginning of this article, love God's word and his creation and earnestly struggle to make sense of it. We have a theology that recognizes the limitation of human reason, and that there will be ambiguity and tension in matters not directly revealed in Holy Scripture. At the same time, we have a vocational responsibility to study and teach the subject to the best of our ability. In particular, it is important for our students and parishioners to recognize that adherence to an old-earth creation perspective carries with it important implications, particularly regarding the Noachian flood and animal death before Adam's fall. Finally, we must not present the appearance that the age of the earth is a "litmus test" for orthodoxy. As a synod, we recognize that young-earth creationism is not a different gospel (Gal 1:6).

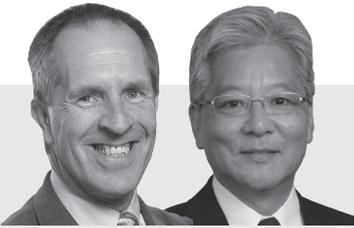
## Endnotes

- 1 For instance, see *Creation Science Research Quarterly*, published continually since 1964.
- 2 For example, the highly publicized debate between Bill Nye and Ken Ham in February, 2014.
- 3 Answers in Genesis has published several such lists that can be found here: <https://answersingenesis.org/colleges/>
- 4 Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 301.
- 5 For example: Eric Von Fange, *In Search of the Genesis World: Debunking the Evolution Myth* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006) and Joel Heck, *In the Beginning God: Creation from God's Perspective* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011).
- 6 <http://www.societyofcreation.org/>
- 7 For a list of papers presented at the conference see: <https://www.creationresearch.org/index.php/component/k2/item/110>
- 8 *In Christ All Things Hold Together: The Intersection of Science and Christian Theology*. This is a report from the Commission on Theology and Church Relations. These CTCRs are prepared and published by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. This and other CTCR reports can be downloaded from the LCMS website: <https://www.lcms.org/CTCR>
- 9 It is accepted in Lutheran theology that many matters regarding the kingdom of the left and the kingdom of the right may be held in tension without conciliation and are not considered contradictory.
- 10 Language used by Steven Gould and others, exemplified in: Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow Time's Cycle Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
- 11 Pius XII Encyclical *Humani Generis* (Given at Rome, 1950, Section 36).

- 12 John Paul II, *Truth Cannot Contradict Truth* (Address to Pontifical Academy of Sciences, 1996, Section 5).
- 13 Passed at the 214 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) (*Resolution 02-17. On Supporting High Public Science Education Standards*, 2002, Section 2).
- 14 Passed by the 75th General Convention of the Episcopal Church (*Resolution 2006-A129 Affirm Evolution and Science Education*, 2006).
- 15 *In Christ All Things Hold Together*, 126.
- 16 Passed by the 2004 Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (*Resolution 2-08A To Commend Preaching and Teaching Creation*).
- 17 *In Christ All Things Hold Together*, 114.
- 18 <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&cid=552>
- 19 For an example of this analysis, see William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus* New Updated Edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 851.
- 20 *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, Adopted 1932, Section 5).
- 21 The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Creation in Biblical Perspective Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations* (1971).
- 22 The Committee of Theology and Church Relations *CTCR Response to Matthew Becker Dissent of 6/9/11* (Adopted by the CTCR 2011, Problematic Issues: Section I, para 2).
- 23 See, for example J. P. Moreland, *Three Views on Creation and Evolution* (Counterpoints) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999); Hugh Ross, *The Genesis Question* (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, 2001) and Henry Schaefer, *Science and Christianity: Conflict or Coherence?* 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: The Apollos Trust, 2016).
- 24 See, for example, William Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge between Science and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999).
- 25 Understood to be “gaps” in the received geological record among preserved species. The most notable discontinuity is between non-living and living matter, but biological discontinuity is often noted between prokaryotes and eukaryotes, the various phyla, and elsewhere.
- 26 Richard Carlson, *Science & Christianity: Four Views* (Spectrum Multiview Book Series) (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000).
- 27 Specifically, the contribution from Paul Nelson and John Mark Reynolds in J. P. Moreland, *Three Views on Creation and Evolution*, 43.
- 28 Hugh Ross, *The Genesis Question* (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing, 2001), 140.
- 29 The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Creation in Biblical Perspective Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations* (1971, Section II Point 6).

# Concordia Seminary and the Science for Seminaries Grant

Charles Arand and Joel Okamoto



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Several years ago, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis applied for and received a Science for Seminaries grant from the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) through Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion (DoSER). AAAS had received funding from the Templeton Foundation in order to foster a dialogue between scientists and theologians/pastors. AAAS is the largest professional scientific society in

the world. It is responsible for publishing the journal *Science*, which relates the most recent scientific thinking today.

AAAS has expressed concern over the conflict between faith and science within our culture. Furthermore, they realize that churches are frequently more influential in shaping values and attitudes of their members than are published scientific studies. Moreover, they acknowledged that many (if not most) of their scientists did not know how to talk to people of faith (especially Christians).

For our part, we at Concordia Seminary had long recognized how important and powerful science is in shaping the way we live within society. There is virtually no aspect of human life today that is untouched and unshaped by science. Few authorities in society bring the prestige and power that science brings. And much of it because science has been wildly successful in increasing our understanding of the world, in combating diseases, and improving lives.

We felt that it was equally important for us to know what is going on in the fields of science today. For if we do not represent these fields accurately when we

criticize them, we not only set up straw men, but also lose our credibility, perhaps even on those matters about which we do know something. It is far easier to live in echo chambers than to engage in face-to-face conversation with those who are not members of our communities.

Finally, we believe in order to serve God's people in the pews, we need to address the questions that science brings. These are often profoundly theological and ethical. We ignore them at the risk of being blindsided with no response.

The discovery of earth-like exoplanets has exploded in the last couple of decades. What if there is life elsewhere (<http://concordiatheology.org/2016/07/life-on-other-planets-what-does-this-mean/>): Our bodies contain microbiomes (<http://www.aaas.org/news/human-microbiome-implications-microcosm-within-us>). What does that mean for me? Am I an ecosystem?

Such questions are likely to accelerate as scientific knowledge and technological change is growing at an exponential pace. One interesting facet is that those with whom we worked at DoSER—all scientists, and all Christians—urged theologians to reflect on these questions. Most of us are theologians with little scientific background. It was time to do a little catch-up.

### ***How We Used the Grant***

One of the questions that the faculty has been interested in is that of anthropology. What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be human when there is more and more talk of us becoming trans-human, post-human and techno-human? Are we no more than our minds and our bodies just vessels for those minds? What is a soul? How does the church answer such questions? We used the grant in the following ways to help get answers.

### **Symposium: Why Memory Is Important and How It Works**

We used a significant portion of the grant to fund our symposium in 2015 that looked at advances in neuroscience and its implications for memory, identity, catechesis, and so on. (See videos online: <http://concordiatheology.org/2017/01/2015-theological-symposium-videos/>)

To paraphrase the symposium brochure: Memory is important for personal identity and community formation. The memories we recall (accurate or not) affect the way in which we see ourselves. And the stories we tell as a community become our memories and identify us as members of that community. What role does brain development play in memory formation, memory function, and memory recall? What are the implications for catechesis, worship, and pastoral care?

Joel Okamoto began with "Why Memory is Always More Important than We Think." Our main speaker, Steve Joordens, then gave two presentations, one from the standpoint of neuroscience ("Brain, Memory and Mind: The Neural Structures That Allow Us to Remember") and the second from the standpoint of psychology

(“You Are What You Remember: How Our Memories Define Who We Are and Support Our Effective Functioning”). Finally, Charlotte Linde, who has done research for NASA, focused on the importance of memory for institutions such as the church (“Remembering with Stories: The Role of Narrative in Personal and Collective Memory”).

### **Science in the Curriculum and Classroom**

One of the goals of the Science for Seminaries grant is to acquaint our students with science that touches on theological/anthropological topics. We did this with a pastoral theology course taught by Dr. Robert Weise, and Dr. Timothy Saleska explored related issues within the context of his Psalms course. As he put it in his syllabus:

The question that I was interested in having the students think about is, “What does it mean to be human?” Obviously, it is a big question and there are many ways we can try to answer it. In class, for example, we usually study Psalm 8, one of the psalms in which the poet reflects on the marvel that is the human creature. At one point, reflecting his own understanding of what it means to be created in God’s image, the poet says, “You made him lack a little from God, that is, with glory and honor you crowned him. That is, you made him ruler over the works of your hands. Everything you put under his feet.” For God’s people, this insight into who we are in relation to God and in relation to the rest of creation has continuing relevance for thinking about how we should be living our lives in this world. Of course, many other texts direct our thinking on this question as well.

Saleska noted the relevance of the question for today.

Scientists, philosophers, artists, and authors offer various perspectives, and some of them are very challenging. Advances in science and technology have challenged the conventional boundaries of what it means to be human. What once seemed to be clear lines no longer seem so clear. As a result, important moral and ethical concerns coalesce around the question of what it means to be human. Therefore, it is good that our students have some understanding of what various scientists and philosophers say about this question. In the light of other perspectives, how might they give a winsome Christian witness? The project is designed to give students an opportunity to do that.

Saleska wanted the students to provide a scientific perspective on the question, “What does it mean to be human?” From there, “what are possible implications for

human life as it is lived in this world that the answer may suggest? What are some of the problems that others have raised in response to the scientific perspective?” Then the students were to develop a project in which they articulated “a winsome Christian vision in answer to this same question” without resorting “to pious platitudes or Sunday-school answers.” They were “in an honest and open way, to identify some questions or problems that their accounts raised or left unsolved.”

### **Book Club**

We held a book club during the fall of 2016 for the entire seminary community—students, staff, faculty, and their families. We read and discussed *Minds, Brains, Souls and Gods: A Conversation on Faith, Psychology and Neuroscience* by Malcolm Jeeves, a distinguished neuropsychologist and a Christian. Following the format of C. S. Lewis’s *Letters to Malcolm*, Jeeves’s book deals with questions that students have posed to him during his long career, including questions about psychology itself, the link between the brain and the mind, the nature of a “soul,” human uniqueness, and religion and spirituality. Jeeves returns answers informed by both science and Christian faith. He wrote the book for “*real students* who want to be intellectually honest, to have Robert Boyle’s *examined faith* and who want, as John Stott suggests, ‘a combination of evangelism and apologetics, not only proclaiming the gospel, but also defending it and arguing for its truth.’” We pursued conversations in the same vein, striving for intellectual honesty as well as Christian faithfulness.

### **Theological History of Science**

Finally, we are using the grant to produce a Lutheran history of science video series for congregations and campus ministries. We want to show that Lutheranism has not been anti-science. Surprisingly, many in our own circles do not realize that Copernicus taught at Wittenberg for a time, that Kepler was a Lutheran, and so on. In a more general sense, we want to show how Christians were heavily engaged in science. We are bringing in some of the leading historians and philosophers of science (for example, Ted Davis, Kenneth Howell, and Owen Gingrich).

Related to the last point, we are especially eager to explore and stress how science fits into our understanding of God’s *creatio continua* and providence—an area that has been much neglected over the past fifty years or more.

### **Reactions to CSL’s Reception of the Grant**

The reactions to our reception of the AAAS grant (via Templeton) from outside the walls of the seminary have been both encouraging and discouraging.

### **Answers in Genesis**

Unfortunately, and perhaps as a sign of the times, no sooner had we received the grant than people outside the seminary began putting the worst construction on it by

concluding that we were now advocating evolution. Perhaps guilt-by-association fallacy produced this logic: AAAS promotes the theory of evolution, Concordia Seminary received a grant from AAAS, therefore the seminary is now teaching evolution. One of the most egregious examples came from the folks at Answers in Genesis.

This past March, Answers in Genesis, and its founder and CEO Ken Ham, maligned Concordia Seminary in a fundraising appeal that contained willful inaccuracies and implied a kind of conspiracy theory of hidden agendas and duplicity. As a result, we received a number of responses from concerned Lutherans. It has since come to our attention that Answers in Genesis has continued this behavior in presentations at their Creation Museum and in other outlets.

In addition, they took an aggressively militaristic tone in a recent blog post (<https://answersingenesis.org/the-word-of-god/help-us-start-something-big-this-year/>) on their website. Shortly after implicating Concordia Seminary once again, Ken Ham writes: “We have to fight a war not only with the world, but also with much of the church!” Apparently, his so-called war is not just with secular culture at large, but with other Christians too. “But it shall not be so among you” (Mk 10:43).

AIG never contacted us or talked with us about how we used the grant and what we teach on this topic. Even after President Meyer wrote to them asking them to stop such false insinuations and asking for a public apology, they refused.

This is unfortunate when our friends at DoSER were and are fully aware of our position regarding a six-day creation (see the Brief Statement). They have not pressured us to change, and what’s more, they feel that we have cultivated a model for mutual respect and dialogue marked by curiosity on both sides to better understand each other’s positions in spite of our disagreements. They have been delighted with the relationships that we have cultivated with Washington University, St. Louis (WUSTL), and have held it up as a model for other seminaries.

### **Concordia Seminary and Washington University**

One of the positive outcomes of our reception of the grant lies in how it has opened up conversations and relationships with groups and people beyond the boundaries of the Missouri Synod. Our science advisor, S. Joshua Swamidass MD, PhD, deserves much of the credit for this. He is a brother in the faith who has become a good friend and avid promoter of Concordia Seminary within the wider Christian and scientific community.

Last summer, Swamidass arranged for some of the leading scientists at WUSTL to speak at Concordia Seminary about their research. Some were Christians. A few were atheists or agnostics. All of them came with a bit of trepidation with mixed feelings about Christians in general and Missouri Synod Lutherans in particular. Their preconceptions were often filtered through the media. What they found surprised them. They found an audience that graciously received them; one that was respectful and curious about their work. In conversations, a number of them expressed interest

in how we read the Bible, how we do theology, and how we arrive at the answers that we do. And all of them said that they would not hesitate to recommend that their colleagues speak with us.

### **Takeaways**

Along the way, we learned a few things of our own about scientists.

First, most scientists distinguish their work from the work of those who have moved from science to philosophy such as Richard Dawkins. Thus, many scientists recognize the limited nature of their work; they are not seeking to make claims about *everything* much less about God. They are trying to understand how the various aspects of our world intersect and operate.

Moreover, not all scientists who are atheists are militantly anti-Christian. One scientist who spoke to us described herself as a third-generation atheist (she has been Christian for a couple of years now). She said that her upbringing was not one that was against Christianity, it was just that she had never given any thought to Christianity or its faith. In other words, it just was not part of her world.

Often times, the problem that scientists have with conservative Christians is not that we hold differing views (such as on the questions of origins), it is instead that we are telling them that they are not doing real science or that they are doing bad science. In other words, they hear us saying, “You don’t know what you are talking about.” And scientists don’t mind being wrong. One scientist said that he finds being wrong energizing and exciting as it opens up new questions and directions.

Second, we learned the need to distinguish between atheistic evolutionists and theistic evolutionists or evolutionary creationists (the preferred term of evangelical Christians as it emphasizes that a *creator* made everything and *evolutionary* is the adjective that describes how God created everything). Christians in the latter group have become convinced that evolution provides a good account for what they see in the world. Even so, they may see difficulties accounting for *deep time* or have other problems that evolutionary theory is insufficient in addressing.

Interestingly, most of these evangelicals hold to the truths that the church confesses in the historic creeds about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Moreover, nearly everyone we met willingly gave a reason for the hope that lies within him or her. Swamidass put it this way, “Chuck, I don’t know of a single scientist who became a Christian by first believing in creation, they became Christian because they found Jesus so compelling.”

Many of these Christian scientists see themselves assailed on all sides. On the one hand, they are isolated and ostracized by their atheistic colleagues for being Christian while, on the other, attacked, at times viciously so, by fellow Christians because of their position on evolution. For many of them, being a Christian scientist can be a lonely calling. Yet it can give them unique opportunities for witness to Christ, as within their fields they have the credibility that opens the door for that witness.

Swamidass, and others like him, engage in an active student ministry within a university setting. All one has to do is attend a *Veritas* event to see young people who are interested in the faith and are struggling to work through the questions they have on faith and science. Faith and science is one of the hottest topics for Christian universities and congregations.

If scientists carry a caricature of Christianity filtered through the media, the same applies to many of us when it comes to science. The media is happy to give a voice to and promote “star-power scientists” like Richard Dawkins, but they do not represent all scientists just as the Westboro Baptist Church does not represent all Christians.

We ourselves run the risk of describing (and interpreting) the supporting data for evolutionary theory inaccurately, or we describe the theory in hundred-year-old terms. Pastors who misrepresent the status of the field and misrepresent what scientists are saying and not saying, run the risk of losing credibility among their congregants who have a strong scientific background. As in any discipline, we need to state the position of evolutionists in such a way that the scientist can say, “Yes, that’s exactly what I am saying.” Only then are we in a position to analyze it.

### **Conclusion**

The grant has been of great benefit in helping us cultivate new conversations, learn about the challenges that we face with every new scientific discovery, and to begin thinking about how we can address these questions both critically and constructively for the sake of the church.

# A Lutheran Voice in Science

*S. Joshua Swamidass*



S. Joshua Swamidass is an assistant professor in the pathology and immunology department at Washington University, Saint Louis, Missouri.

I am a scientist in the church, and a follower of Jesus in science.

I am an assistant professor at Washington University in Saint Louis, one of the leading science institutions of the world. I run a computational biology research group where I develop

computational methods to solve problems at the intersection of chemistry, biology, and medicine.

I am also a confessing scientist. I found confident faith in science through Jesus. I follow him because God raised him from the dead. Through his act in history, God reveals himself to the world. This is how I know that he exists, that he is good, and that he wants to be known. When I encountered the living God, my entire world was reordered. Because of Jesus, I hold that the Bible is inerrant, infallible, and useful in all it affirms. From this message, I came to believe God created us all through a process that science could only incompletely comprehend. I confess a historical Adam, a real person in a real past from whom we all descend. God created me for science. I find part of myself here. I have searched all over, and nothing here threatens Jesus. Nothing here diminishes him. Jesus is the Lord of all things, including science. Jesus is greater.

I make this confession publicly, so it carries personal and professional risk. As an untenured professor, I depend on the forbearance and understanding of scientists who do not share my faith. Atheists have been kind to me. They have been people of peace (Lk 10:6–9). I stay with them now, as a Christian in the scientific world. A curiosity that prompts questions.

I am also a scientist in the church. I serve with a truthful witness of what I have seen in science. I rise to answer questions in the church about science. In this role,

I travel the country to explain what I have seen. This gives me a broad view of the dialogue between science and the Christian faith. For this reason, the AAAS invited me to be an ambassador of science to Concordia Seminary.

Responding to this invitation, I have earnestly studied Lutheran theology for several years now. I found a surprise. I found a new voice in science I had not before encountered.

### ***Where Is the Lutheran Voice?***

Over the last four centuries, science has illuminated the workings of our world, with unprecedented success. This success enables the technology that powers the modern world, and shapes all areas of our culture. It is the authority for truth and has become the objective standard for secularism. Science defines our world.

What is the Lutheran voice in science? For at least the last century, Lutherans in science often echoed their fundamentalist neighbors. The distinctly Lutheran voice in science has been silenced.

It need not remain this way. A Lutheran voice, centered on a distinctly Lutheran history, theology, and epistemology could be recovered. A Lutheran voice could reshape the dialogue between faith and science in our world.

### ***Lutheran History***

Early Lutherans productively engaged with science. This history is an important model for us all. Luther's Reformation supported an environment of inquiry, with institutions that enabled early scientists to work, and printing presses to spread their ideas. Science was controversial in the early days, starting with the Copernican Revolution. Entirely defying "common sense" intuition, heliocentrism imagined the earth hurtled through the heavens around the sun. This counter-intuitive finding entirely reshaped our view of the cosmos, and launched the modern scientific enterprise.

Missing the full story, some focus only on Martin Luther's offhand comment in a casual conversation about geocentrism in 1539. "This is what that fellow does who wishes to turn the whole of astronomy upside down. Even in these things that are thrown into disorder I believe the Holy Scriptures, for Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth." It seems like Luther is blithely dismissing the progress of science. The real history is entirely different.

Luther's doubts notwithstanding, the Lutheran church never took an official position against Copernican theory. To the contrary, the Lutheran University of Wittenberg played a central role in promoting study of heliocentrism. It was Georg Joachim Rheticus, a professor at the University of Wittenburg, who first published the Copernican theory in 1540 and then encouraged Copernicus to publish a more complete treatment. Later, in 1609, another Lutheran, Johannes Kepler, published his opus *Astronomia Nova*, a careful geometric analysis that demonstrated that ellipses, not circles, traced the paths of planets, including the earth, around the sun.

*In our world, science is the most trusted path to truth, but it does not lead to God.*

So, despite Luther's biblically grounded skepticism of Copernican theory, Lutherans openly considered and embraced heliocentrism without fear of reprisal. This forbearance enabled scientific progress and, more importantly, careful theological reflection. Lutherans prepared

the church as a whole to correctly handle Scripture in light of the new astronomy. Kepler's introduction to *Astronomia Nova* includes a careful exegetical analysis of Psalm 104 and Joshua, showing these passages did not put science at odds with the Bible. A faithful reading of the Bible allowed for a true understanding of the cosmos.

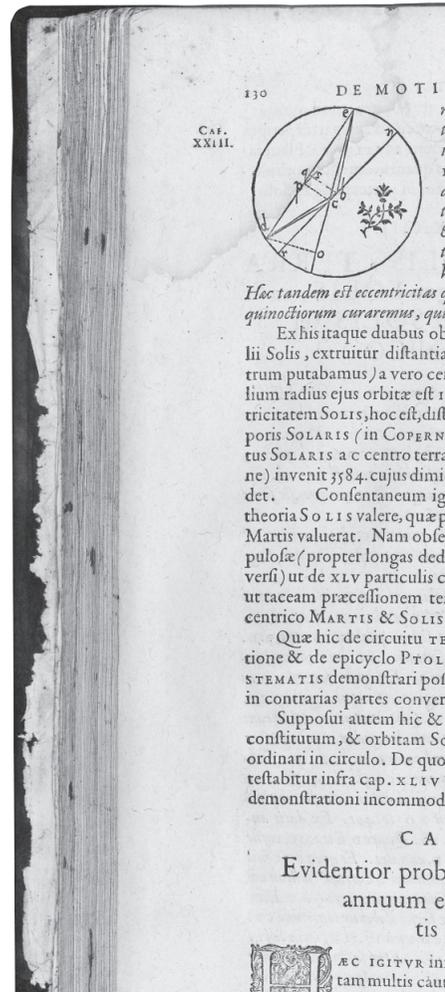
In this history, I see a rich heritage to which both Christians and scientists are deeply indebted. As a scientist, I admire Kepler's obvious and diligent brilliance. As a Christian, I identify with his worshipful devotion to the Creator in his study of creation. I hope I can emulate his careful attention to the theological implications of his work. I also aspire to Luther's graceful forbearance of those who disagreed with him. Lutherans granted early scientists the autonomy to understand nature on its own terms, and for this they played a key role in shaping the modern scientific enterprise. This is the same tradition that governs science now when my atheist colleagues accept me, a confessing scientist, as one of their own.

A Lutheran voice in science might remember and retell these stories. It might grant scientists the autonomy to study nature on its own terms, and it might carefully prepare the church for all that science uncovers.

### **Lutheran Epistemology**

In our world, science is the most trusted path to truth, but it does not lead to God. Most trust science—the human effort to study nature—over God's revelation to us of himself. In this way, science is an “epistemological” challenge to faith. How do we now our faith is true? If science causes us to rethink our interpretations of Scripture, and religion seems unnecessary, why do we continue in faith?

Christians ground their confidence in the human ability to interpret the Bible. From this starting point, the controversies that science provokes are very difficult. Our interpretations

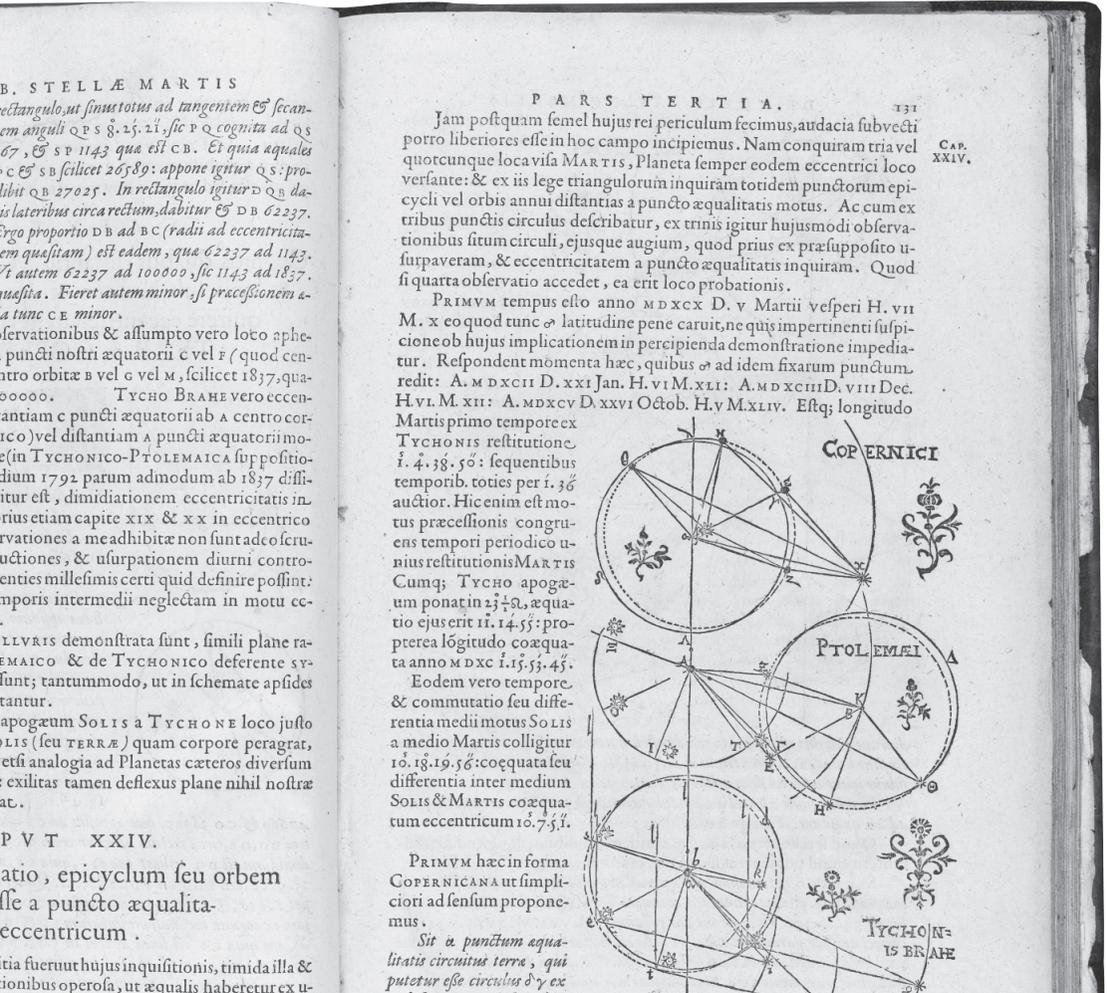


of Scripture often conflict with science; either our interpretation is wrong or science itself is wrong. Some aggressively argue with scientists; others try creating new “correct” versions of science; and many are disengaged from science entirely. Some even try to use scientific arguments as a foundation for trusting the Bible. Ranging from argumentative to withdrawn, these responses to science seem insecure. Why would our faith be unsettled so much by studying nature?

The Lutheran answer is different; it is confident. We believe the Bible because of Jesus, not the other way around. Lutheranism is rooted solidly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We follow Jesus because God proved his revelation to us in him by raising him from the dead. This is the only reason we trust the Bible and accept its authority. Jesus brings us to confident faith, not any specific interpretation of Psalms, Joshua, or Genesis.

This confidence explains Lutheran tolerance of early scientists that questioned the anti-heliocentric interpretations of Psalms and Joshua. Human interpretations

*From Johannes Kepler's Astronomia Nova (1609). Image credit: sothebys.com.*



B. STELLÆ MARTIS  
 rectangulo, ut sinus totius ad tangentem est fecan-  
 em anguli  $Q P S$   $8.15.21$ , sic  $P Q$  cognita ad  $Q S$   
 $67$ , et  $S P$   $1143$  qua est  $C B$ . Et quia aequalis  
 $C E$  s  $B$  scilicet  $26589$ ; appone igitur  $Q S$ : prohi-  
 bit  $Q B$   $27025$ . In rectangulo igitur  $D Q B$  da-  
 tis lateribus circa rectum, dabitur  $E S$   $D B$   $62237$ .  
 Ergo proportio  $D B$  ad  $B C$  (radii ad eccentricita-  
 tem quasitam) est eadem, qua  $62237$  ad  $1143$ .  
 Et autem  $62237$  ad  $100000$ , sic  $1143$  ad  $1837$ .  
 Quasita. Fieret autem minor, si præcessionem  $a$ -  
 a tunc  $C E$  minor.

Observationibus & assumpto vero loco aphe-  
 puncti nostri æquatorii  $C$  vel  $F$  (quod cen-  
 tro orbitæ  $B$  vel  $C$  vel  $M$ , scilicet  $1837$ , qua-  
 00000. TYCHO BRAHE vero eccen-  
 trantiam  $C$  puncti æquatorii  $ab$   $A$  centro  
 corico) vel distantiam  $A$  puncti æquatorii mo-  
 (in TYCHONICO-PTOLEMÆICA superpositio-  
 nium  $1792$  parum admodum  $ab$   $1837$  diffi-  
 ditur est, dimidiationem eccentricitatis in-  
 rius etiam capite  $XIX$  &  $XX$  in eccentrico  
 variations a me adhibita non sunt adeo ser-  
 uationes, & usurpationem diurni contro-  
 enties millesimis certi quid definire possint:  
 temporis intermedii neglectam in motu ec-

LVLRIS demonstrata sunt, simili plane  
 MAICO & de TYCHONICO deferente sy-  
 sunt; tantummodo, ut in schemate apud  
 tantur.  
 apogæum SOLIS a TYCHONE loco iusto  
 LIS (seu TERRÆ) quam corpore peragrat,  
 est analogia ad Planetas cæteros diversum  
 exilitas tamen deflexus plane nihil nostræ  
 at.

P V T XXIV.  
 atio, epicyclum seu orbem  
 esse a puncto æqualita-  
 eccentricum.

entia fuerit hujus inquisitionis, timida illa &  
 tionibus operosa, ut æqualis haberetur ex u-

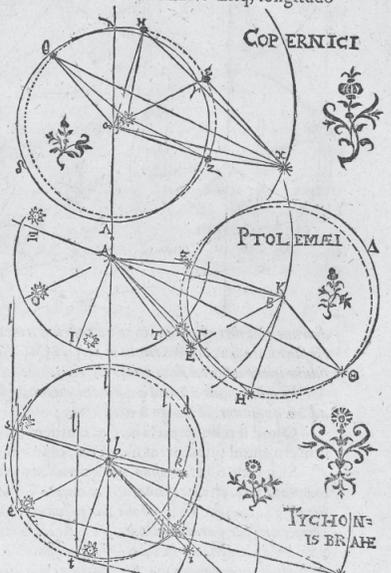
P A R S T E R T I A . 131  
 Jam postquam semel hujus rei periculum fecimus, audacia subvecti  
 portio liberiores esse in hoc campo incipimus. Nam conquiram tria vel  
 quoruncunque loca visâ MARTIS, Planeta semper eodem eccentrici loco  
 versante: & ex iis lege triangulorum inquiram totidem punctorum epi-  
 cycli vel orbis annui distantias a puncto æqualitatis motus. Ac cum ex  
 tribus punctis circulus describatur, ex trinis igitur hujusmodi observa-  
 tionibus situm circuli, ejusque augium, quod prius ex præsupposito u-  
 fuperaveram, & eccentricitatem a puncto æqualitatis inquiram. Quod  
 si quarta observatio accedat, ea erit loco probationis.

PRIMUM tempus esto anno MDCXC D. V Martii vesperi H. VII  
 M. X eo quod tunc  $\alpha$  latitudine pene caruit, ne quis impertinenti suspi-  
 cione ob hujus implicationem in percipienda demonstratione impediatur.  
 Respondent momenta hæc, quibus  $\alpha$  ad idem fixarum punctum  
 redit: A. MDCXCII D. XXI Jan. H. VI M. XLI: A. MDCXCIII D. VIII Dec.  
 H. VI M. XII: A. MDCXCV D. XXVI Octob. H. V. M. XLIV. Estq; longitudo  
 Martis primo tempore ex  
 TYCHONIS restitutione,  
 $1.4.38.50$ : sequentibus  
 temporibus toties per  $1.36$   
 auctior. Hic enim est motus  
 præcessionis congruen-  
 tens temporis periodico u-  
 nius restitutionis MARTIS  
 Cumq; TYCHO apogæum  
 ponat in  $25.25$ , æqua-  
 tio ejus erit  $11.14.55$ : pro-  
 pterea longitudo coæqua-  
 ta anno MDCX  $1.15.53.45$ .

Eodem vero tempore  
 & commutato seu diffe-  
 rentia mediæ motus SOLIS  
 a medio Martis colligitur  
 $16.18.19.56$ : coæquata seu  
 differentia inter medium  
 SOLIS & MARTIS coæqua-  
 tum eccentricum  $16.7.5.1$ .

PRIMUM hæc in forma  
 COPERNICANA ut simpli-  
 ciori ad sensum proponem-  
 mus.

Sit  $a$  punctum æqua-  
 litatis circulus terre, qui  
 patetur esse circulus  $d$   $q$  ex



of the Bible were never the foundation. Consequently, early Lutherans could confidently tolerate disagreement and theologically reflect on science's discoveries without fear of retribution. Lutherans had a confident faith, unchallenged by the human study of nature.

A Lutheran voice in science might call us back to a Jesus-grounded epistemology. It might remind us that the only path to confident faith in our scientific world is through Jesus. In him, we find a solid foundation from which to understand everything else. In the current moment, we need this confidence again.

## **Lutheran Theology**

With its history with science, it is no surprise that Lutheran theology holds special relevance to science. In particular, I see value in its famous emphasis on "paradox." In this Lutheran way of thinking, both sides of superficially contradictory truths are wholly affirmed.

An example of this paradox is that we are both *sinner*s in need of saving grace and called to repentance, and also *saint*s that stand confidently before a Holy God. Correctly, the Lutheran ideal of paradox recognizes that ignoring one half of the paradox misrepresents the fullness and complexity of God's message and nature.

In the same way, God is both perfectly just and perfectly merciful. He has given us both law and grace under which to live. He is sovereign but grants us the autonomy of free will. We enter a kingdom that is already but not yet here. Jesus is both the Lord and servant of all. Following the same pattern, even encountering apparent contradictions, we could hold that God speaks to us both in Scripture and through science.

On one hand, science describes our world using physical mechanisms, randomness, and human effort. On the other hand, theology describes our world as the purposeful work of a loving God. Therefore, even when science's explanations are correct, they are always incomplete, inviting us to illuminate the theological truth. Perhaps a paradox lies at the heart of our conflicts with science, even our contradictory stories of creation. The scientific account focuses on natural mechanisms and appeals to randomness; the theological account focuses on God's purposeful effort. Could these accounts be two halves of a paradox?

Consider, first, how I was created in my mother's womb, the creation of me. Theologically, I know that I am "fearfully and wonderfully made." God "knit me together in my mother's womb." He knew me from "before the foundations of the earth were laid." Scientifically, we hear an entirely different story. This story begins when my parent's cells reshuffled their genomes in a controlled but random process, to produce a large number of eggs and sperm. My parents then decided to conceive a child. An egg and sperm were randomly selected and then joined together in an embryo. In a cascade of entirely physical processes, the dizzying complexity of my body then arose. This is how I was created from a scientific point of view: by randomness, human decision, and physical mechanisms.

No one disputes the scientific account of our embryological origins. No one runs experiments to detect God's knitting, even though science seems to contradict the theological account. Instead of a contradiction, we see that embryology is God's "way" of knitting us in our mother's womb. We confidently teach both sides of this account, the scientific and the theological, without naively trying to ignore half of the story. The way most Christians naturally think about embryology is a very Lutheran embrace of paradox.

When we consider the creation of the human species, there is much more conflict and disagreement. How should our theology engage with science? Many Christians object to scientific accounts of our origins because they include randomness and do not include God explicitly. Others reject the authority of science on matters of the past, but accept it regarding the present.<sup>1</sup> These are complicated and controversial areas, but I wonder if embracing paradox could help. Perhaps this, also, could be the Lutheran voice in science.

### ***Recovering a Lutheran Voice***

As I have listened to the Lutheran voice, it has given me language to understand my journey. In many ways, I have been like the Ethiopian eunuch, encountering something important but incomplete. Lutherans have been like Philip, giving me language to understand my journey. In my encounter with theology from another culture, I found truth that names what God has been doing for decades in my life and journey.

This personal encounter with Lutheran theology changed me. Talking about science with people from all denominations across the country, I feel Lutheran theology's absence. Somehow, we no longer hear the Lutheran voice in science. I am convinced that we are all suffering from this silence.

It is my sincere hope that the Lutheran voice in science will be recovered. The church of all believers needs your Lutheran voice.

1 This is an idiosyncratic redefinition of science in that it does not describe science as scientists understand and teach science. One of the correct goals of science is to construct the past. We have no power to re-define science against the wishes of scientists, so this response is ineffectual. A better response to science accepts the definition of science given by scientists. This definition includes the past. From here, we correctly delimit this scientific account in both the present and the past. I advocate a limited view of science that holds it as a trustworthy, but provisional, account of only part of the world. It never gives us a complete view of all that is important. When God acts, it might even fail. The task of theology is to complete the scientific account with a vision of Jesus in our scientific world.



# *Homiletical Helps*



# Homiletical Helps on LSB Series A—Epistles

*Editor's note: the following seven homiletical helps for the readings from Romans are taken from David Schmitt's sermon series "God's Greater Story: A Sermon Series on Romans 6–14," which is available for download at <http://www.csl.edu/sermon-series>.*

## **Proper 13 • Romans 9:1–5 (6–13) • August 6, 2017**

As you listen to our text, you realize that we have come across Paul in a very private moment. Paul is engaged in prayer. His prayer is powerful and personal and very, very painful. I don't know if you have ever come before God on behalf of someone you love, someone you care about, and yet someone who will have nothing to do with the faith. You love that person. You know that God loves that person. And you know that God would desire that person to be saved and yet that person wants nothing to do with God. And so you stand there, alone, not because you don't believe in God. You believe in God. But you are alone because you stand there without your friend, your mother, your son who has walked away from the faith. If you have ever been there, you have a very small clue of what the Apostle Paul is experiencing.

Paul cries out, "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."

Paul is concerned about his brothers, his kinsmen, the Jewish people. Five years before, the Jewish people had been expelled from Rome. The Emperor Claudius was attempting to maintain law and order in the city. There had been civil unrest and so he acted as previous emperors had done (Tiberius in AD 19) and expelled the Jews from Rome. The expulsion was limited to the Jews and the expulsion was limited to Rome. When Claudius died, his expulsion died with him. The Jewish people were now returning to Rome and yet, the question was, how would the church receive them? What had begun as a movement of faith among the Jews was now predominantly Gentile. The Jews had left, but the church had remained and grown with Gentile believers. Paul was worried, not only about the Jews who did not believe but also about the Gentiles who may not have seen any reason to care about the Jewish people.

Earlier in the letter, Paul asked a very important question. As he revealed that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, Paul asked, "Then what advantage has the Jew?" We would expect Paul to say, "None." That is, "*all* are sinful and *all* are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ." Therefore, there is no advantage to being a Jew. But, surprisingly, Paul says something different. "What advantage has

the Jew?” Paul asked. His answer was, “much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.” That listing that Paul began in Romans 3, he continues now in Romans 9. Listen as Paul reveals the blessings of God upon Israel: “They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.”

Paul is engaged in a moment of prayer, very personal and very private, and yet notice how his prayer is wrapped up in the larger story of God. Paul is not praying for himself but for God’s people. Paul is not setting before God his day and his plans and asking for God’s blessing. No, Paul finds God’s greater story set before him, and he is praying for fulfillment of what God has planned. God has chosen Abraham to be the father of his people and from Abraham God has chosen to bless not only his people but all nations on the face of the earth. From Abraham and his descendants, according to the flesh, comes Christ and Christ is the one in whom Israel and all nations of the earth are blessed. Paul knows this greater story of God and this story shapes Paul’s life and prayer.

What is amazing is that Paul in prayer is caught up in the heart of God’s story. Notice how Paul is willing to die for the sake of the Jews. Paul knows that not all of his Jewish brothers and sisters have believed in Jesus. Because of the expulsion of the Jews from Rome, it would be very easy for the Christian church to become a Gentile church, that does not see or value or care about Israel. And so Paul finds himself overwhelmed with pain and personal love and he wishes that he himself could be cut off from Christ, if that could save the Jewish people. Here, Paul’s heart is filled with the love of Jesus. Jesus is the very one who was willing to be cut off from God, who was willing to drink the cup of his Father’s wrath, who was willing to be forsaken by God and condemned to hell, that the kingdom of God might be opened to all people who trust in him. In him is forgiveness, life, and everlasting salvation. In him is the promise that your sins are forgiven and that you are now part of the people of God, people who live by that promise as part of God’s greater story.

This is what the Apostle Paul is doing in his prayer. He is living by that promise, letting God’s greater story, God’s greater vision, shape his prayer and his life in self-sacrificial love.

*David Schmitt*

### **Proper 14 • Romans 10: 5–17 • August 13, 2017**

When Jesus was crucified, we indeed nailed him to the cross. His own people tried him, found him guilty of blasphemy, and rejected their God. And we would do the same had he come among us today. There is no doubt that God himself was rejected by his people and hung upon the cross to die. But that is not the only reason Jesus hung upon the cross. He could have delivered himself . . . if he wanted to. Remember

on the night when Jesus was betrayed how Peter drew his sword to try to protect him. Jesus then turned to Peter and said, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Mt 26:33). When Jesus hung upon the cross, the religious leaders mocked him.

They called out for him to come down from the cross and save himself if he were truly God. But Jesus stayed on the cross, not because he was only human and couldn’t get down but because he was truly God and wouldn’t get down. Jesus stayed on the cross because he didn’t come into this world to save himself. No, he came to save you. It was the pure love of God that led Jesus to that cross and it was the pure love of God that held Jesus up there—offering his sinless life for the sins of the whole world. Jesus hanging on the cross without nails is not a realistic picture of what happened at the crucifixion, but it is a true picture of what happened on that day. God, in Jesus Christ, willingly gave his life for you and for the world that you live in.

This is something that the Apostle Paul understands. Salvation comes to us purely by grace. It is only by the love of God poured out for us in Jesus Christ that we are saved. We are part of God’s greater people, saved by grace.

As Paul proclaims this truth among the Roman Christians, he does so by revisiting a familiar text for God’s people. Just as Dali took a traditional picture of the crucifixion and offered new insight, so Paul took a traditional text and asked God’s people to hear it and read it again. Paul turns to the book of Deuteronomy, that record of covenant renewal among God’s people.

God’s people are there, on the edge of the promised land. After forty years in the wilderness, they are about to enter the land of God’s promise. Before they enter, God renews his covenant with them. In the beginning of that covenant renewal, God warns the people of Israel about how they should view this moment. Moses says, “Do not say in your heart after God has thrust [the nations] out before you, ‘It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land. . . . Know therefore that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people” (Dt 9:4, 6). Here, Moses asks them to look at their past. They were a stubborn people and did not earn the promised land by their own righteousness. At the end of that covenant renewal, God prophesies to the people of Israel. He speaks of a time when they will depart from God and be exiled from their land and then God, in mercy, will come. They will repent and God will bring about a restoration. Here, Moses asks them to see their future. Their future lies only in the mercy of God.

It is that vision of that future that Paul quotes here. Only as Paul quotes this vision, he adds his own words for emphasis. He wants us to see the love of God, freely given for all people . . . now . . . in Christ. Listen to Paul. “The righteousness based on faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart “Who will ascend into heaven” (that is, to bring Christ down) or “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and

in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim).” For Paul, that day of restoration had come to God’s people. It had come in Jesus Christ and it had come purely by grace. With these words, Paul reaches out to his Jewish brothers and sisters and invites them to join with the Roman Gentile Christians in confessing salvation in Jesus Christ, by grace, through faith. At the heart of God’s covenant lies not what we do for salvation but rather what God does for us. We are saved not because we are mighty or numerous or particularly holy people. No, we are stubborn and rebellious and sinners before God. But we are saved by God’s mercy made known for us in Jesus Christ. At the heart of God’s restoration of all things lies the work of God in Jesus. He came down from heaven, he entered into hell, and he rose again that we might be forgiven and be part of God’s people who live by grace through faith.

*David Schmitt*

### **Proper 15 • Romans 11:1–2a, 13–15, 28–32 • August 20, 2017**

Have you ever noticed how some art museums post guards near the paintings? If they don’t post a guard, they might put a red velvet rope in place to prevent people from coming too close to the paintings. The curators have told patrons, “You can come this close and no closer.” If you reach out your hand to point to a detail, a guard may correct you and ask you step back. Art has a way of drawing us in. We find ourselves moving closer and closer to the painting, examining small details.

The only problem with this way of viewing art is that sometimes you can be so close to that you lose sight of what it is really about. We have an old saying that describes this experience—“you can’t see the forest for the trees.” Because a person is so immersed in the trees, they can’t step back and see the forest. Being immersed in the details sometimes prevents you from seeing the larger picture.

Consider a piece of art created by Willem Vrelant, a manuscript illuminator living in the fourteenth century. At first glance, his work is confusing. It is a picture of King David in an open-air chapel, surrounded by a proliferation of vines and flowers. You know you should look at David but your eyes are drawn to the flowers. Some flowers are deep blue. Others are brilliant gold. The leaves literally sparkle. Upon closer glance, you see two birds and, above them, what look like strawberries. There is so much to see that for a moment your eyes get lost. You are tracing a maze of vines and flowers, catching a bird here and a berry there.

Something like this can happen in reading this chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans. One is drawn in by the strangeness of Paul’s words. Paul is discussing the status of Israel in God’s plan of salvation. At some points, Paul speaks of the hardening of Israel. He voices claims that God has rejected his people, hardened their hearts. At other points, Paul speaks of the salvation of Israel, their election and being beloved for the sake of their forefathers. When read up close and out of context, his words can become confusing.

They have led some theologians to argue that Paul here lays the foundation for

anti-Jewish sentiment in the Christian church. Since God has rejected Israel and chosen the Gentile nations, the church now lives the same way. After the Jews were expelled from Rome, the Gentile church survived and now would have little reason to welcome back their brothers and sisters in the faith. Other theologians have used these verses to argue for a future day when God will restore the Jewish people and to fight for that restoration as a prelude to the return of Christ. This concern for Israel gets expressed in political action and becomes a way in which the church can hasten the return of Christ.

Has God rejected Israel or not? Will God save Israel or not? These are the questions arising from the text. Even more troubling, however, is the picture these verses can give you of God. God seems unfaithful—one time calling a people to be his own and then rejecting them only to call another. What is to keep God from rejecting the Gentile church? Can God be trusted when he makes promises . . . when he claims people . . . any people . . . Gentile or Jew?

*David Schmitt*

### **Proper 16 • Romans 11:33–12:8 • August 27, 2017**

Consider Paul's vision.

You know how sometimes when you look at the sun and then look away, your vision is touched by an afterimage of the light? You see the people around you but they look different. They are bathed in the glow of the light. This is what happens to the Apostle Paul in our text. He has seen a brilliant vision. The glorious work of God, extending to all nations. And then, when Paul turns and looks at the people of Rome, he sees them in a different way.

Listen to the wonder of Paul at the beginning of our text. Paul is in awe at God's story of salvation fulfilled in the world. Paul writes, "O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and inscrutable his ways!" (11:33). Paul has seen a vision of the end of the story. The restoration of all peoples in the church. The new Israel of God. That vision is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy from our Old Testament reading today.

Isaiah prophesied of a time of "joy and gladness" of "thanksgiving and song." Isaiah promises that when "the ransomed of the Lord will return and come to Zion . . . everlasting joy shall be upon their heads" and "sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (51:11). This is what happens for the Apostle Paul. He sees the day of restoration, when God brings about a gathering of nations, all nations, Jew and Gentile, into the church, and Paul's sorrow turns into singing, his sighing into praise. It is as if Paul has seen the light of a beautiful sunset, a glorious ending to a long and difficult day; his song changes from sorrow to joy, from sighing to gladness. He offers praise and thanksgiving and glory to God.

Then Paul turns his eyes to the church in Rome. Now, the Roman Christians would not have been glorious to the world around them. Not many of them were

rich. Not many of them were powerful. They gathered in small house churches, their lives a far cry from the glories of Rome much less the glories of heaven. Yet, as Paul looks at these people, he sees earth crammed with heaven and he writes so that they join him in celebrating the wonder of God.

Paul writes, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (12:1). Notice how Paul uses the language of sacrifice. The sacrificial worship of God’s people, that glory of the temple in Jerusalem, is suddenly transformed. God’s people become sacrifices, outside the temple, outside Jerusalem, hidden inside the small house churches gathering in the heart of the large empire of Rome. These people are God’s people, transformed into sacrifices, living, holy, acceptable to God. Paul knew that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ put an end to temple sacrifices. His death was the perfect sacrifice. He was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. By his sacrifice, God’s people were freed from offering sacrifices for sins. By his sacrifice, they were freed to become sacrifices. Living sacrifices of praise. As they poured out their lives in service in the world.

As Paul looks at the people in Rome, he sees an afterimage of God’s glory. They are the body of Christ, at work in the world. Paul begins to see gifts of the Spirit poured out upon the people—prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, contribution, leadership, and mercy. Not only does God freely forgive all sins he also freely bestows all gifts, so that people have a purpose and a place in God’s greater story. God has a greater plan for each person in his story of salvation.

This is the vision Paul sees. It stirs his heart with wonder. It opens his mouth with praise. Earth is crammed with heaven as God gathers his people and transforms them for spiritual service in the world.

*David Schmitt*

### **Proper 17 • Romans 12:9–21 • September 3, 2017**

Our text from Romans today is challenging. Paul writes to encourage God’s people but his words are overwhelming to us. “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another . . . be fervent in spirit . . . rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer” and that’s only a small portion of the first three verses. His list goes on and on.

Listening to his words it’s easy to feel exhausted. To feel unworthy. To wonder if the Holy Spirit could ever form within us all of these desires of God. Paul’s list is overwhelming and leaves us wondering, “Where do we start? What should we pay attention to? What is a Christian to do with all of these words?”

Let’s say you were to take one exhortation a day and really work on that one. So, for Monday, you take “Let love be genuine” and all day, you try to demonstrate genuine love. Passing by someone in the hall at work, you say, “how are you doing?” only this time you stop to listen and then you respond to what’s going on in her life.

Today, love is more than words of a casual greeting. It involves action and interaction, genuinely experienced and genuinely expressed. Tuesday you move to the next exhortation and work on “Abhor what is evil.” If you were to do this for every one of these exhortations, it would take you almost a month to get through the list. And that would be spending only one day on each one and assuming that you could actually do these things. Paul’s list of exhortations is overwhelming to the Christian.

Yet maybe Paul was *trying* to overwhelm God’s people—not with commands about what they had to be doing, but with a glimpse, just a glimpse of the kingdom of God, coming alive in their midst.

In our text, Paul is not setting out a twelve-step program to “build the better spiritual you” but rather revealing the varied ways in which God is at work in the world. Paul invites us to consider that vision so that today, in our small corner of this vast world, we too can participate in this ever-living kingdom of God.

*David Schmitt*

### ***Proper 18 • Romans 13:1–10 • September 10, 2017***

At the time Paul wrote this letter, Nero publicized his rule as the dawn of a golden age. Yet, privately, there were rumors that his mother had poisoned Claudius, her husband and uncle, to secure the throne for her son. Nero himself joked about the poisoning, saying that Claudius became a god by eating a mushroom. A poisoned one. Why use a sword when a mushroom can work just as well? While there were suspicions of assassination and conspiracy and a fearful use of power, Nero pictured himself early on as one who promoted peace. When Seneca offered an essay to Nero on mercy, he celebrated the fact that Nero had sheathed the sword. Prophecies said that his reign was the dawn of the golden age. In one poem, a child comes in from working in the fields and stands before a sword hanging in his father’s house and marvels at it. He does not need to carry a sword nor use one since this is a time of peace. What the public heard about Nero is that he had hidden his sword but privately what they whispered about Nero revealed their darkest fears.

Imagine the difficulty this posed for Christians. How do you relate to the civil authorities when publicly they say one thing and privately do another? How do you obey, as a Christian, when it seems like the rulers you are asked to obey are obscured by propaganda so you never know the truth? The question is as relevant for Christians today as it was for Christians in Rome.

Look at our political landscape and the struggles of Christians. Some refuse to have anything to do with politics. They withdraw from the political world, from the responsibilities that they have as citizens, because politics are corrupt and they don’t want anything to do with that world. Others want to use the political realm to create a Christian nation. Turning away from God’s gift of the church, where God gathers his people through the proclamation of the gospel, they turn to the nation, wanting the nation to take the place of the church, proclaiming the gospel from political

offices and enforcing God's word through the power of the sword.

The Apostle Paul offers another way. Paul knows of two kingdoms, two ways in which God is at work in the world. Earlier in the letter, Paul has recognized God's gift of the church. The church is the means whereby God proclaims salvation, gathering for himself a people who share his message of salvation with the world. Now, Paul speaks of God's gift of civil authority. One looks to such authorities not for a proclamation of the gospel but for an enactment of God's good rule in the world.

Paul could have spoken like any other propagandist. He could have argued for obedience to rulers because of their character, because they showed mercy, or because they had sheathed the sword. But Paul anchors Christian obedience not on something as temporary and fleeting as the person in office or the laws of the empire. No, Paul anchors obedience on something as powerful and eternal as God. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (v. 1). Paul turns the eyes of the early Christians from the realm of Rome to the realm of God. They are to see that the present authorities are masks of God, offices that God has established in his rule of the world. Though Nero's propaganda encouraged people to think he had sheathed his sword, Paul claims that God has given one to him and that he does not bear it in vain (v. 4). Whether he believes or does not believe, he is a "servant of God" (v. 4), placed in authority.

Some who hold these offices test God's people, driving them deeper and deeper into the experience of faith, so that Christians believe in the midst of persecution and confess the faith in the midst of a world of contempt. Others offer a public witness, honoring God by their words and seeking to serve him as best they can through their actions. Our relationship to these authorities, however, is not based on their person but on God's work. Within their offices, we see the power of God, establishing order for all people in the world. They have been given the power to restrain evil and promote good. Sometimes they use it wisely. Other times not. But that does not diminish their office, the fact that God has established the civil authorities not to save people but to care for them.

*David Schmitt*

### **Proper 19 • Romans 14:1–12 • September 17, 2017**

This morning, Paul's words to us are strange. Strange, in that he joins two very different things together. In just a few short verses, Paul moves from talking about food to talking about the return of Christ.

Paul begins by talking about eating. Not eating as in partaking of the Lord's Supper but eating as in consuming daily food. Some Christians in Rome are eating only vegetables and others are eating all things, without any discrimination. This matter is so small and so specific that scholars today have trouble understanding it.

It seems there was an argument about whether or not Roman Christians should keep Jewish food laws. Could they eat meat that was not kosher? If in doubt, should they abstain from meat all together? So, on the one hand, Paul is writing about something small and temporal. He is delving into the details of our daily dishes.

Then, in just a few verses, Paul speaks about that which is large and eternal. He asks us to remember that we all shall stand before the judgment seat of Christ. We will give an account to him of our lives. Here, Paul's vision expands. He sees the return of Christ and the Last Judgment. This judgment embraces life, all of life, both now and forever.

In just a few short verses, Paul moves from the food on your plate to the judgment seat of Christ. From the small and the temporal to the large and the eternal. What does eating have to do with the judgment seat of Christ? How are these two joined together?

For Paul, the return of Christ is not something distant from God's people. As Paul writes, "For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we died to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Rom 14:7–8). In baptism, God has claimed you as his own. He has joined you to Christ. This Christ has risen and ascended and promises to come again. Until that day when he returns, you are his. Your daily life has been woven into his kingdom and his loving rule is expressed in the details of your daily life. Paul wants Christians to know that God has woven his loving rule in the details of our daily lives.

*David Schmitt*

*Editor's note: David Schmitt provides the following four homiletical helps as a sermon series on the lectionary's successive readings from Paul's letter to the Philippians.*

### **Proper 20 • Philippians 1:12–14, 19–30 • September 24, 2017**

In a culture that is redefining what it means to be family, the Christian church has devoted significant efforts to defending God's design of the human family. There is, however, another family that God desires for us to attend to. This family is created not by flesh but by the Spirit, not by genetics but by the gospel, not by human decision but by the working of God.

In a culture where more and more people find themselves displaced from the biological family, the Apostle Paul has a letter that encourages us to remember and reveal that we are part of the family of God.

Philippians is approached by identifying major themes, opportunities for application, and an activity that could be done in the congregation that would put such faith into practice.

## Textual Exposition

In reading Philippians, we are reading a letter of friendship. Paul is in prison, most likely in Rome, and has received from the church in Philippi a gift to support him in his imprisonment. Paul now writes to thank them for the gift, to send a fellow-worker to care for them, and to offer his words of encouragement to those he considers brothers and sisters in the faith.

In this section of the letter, Paul offers a prayer for the Philippians (1:3–11), updates them on his affairs (1:12–26), and offers counsel regarding their affairs (1:27–30). The letter, thus, begins with a remarkable demonstration of the way in which the Spirit works in the midst of separation and persecution to foster faith.

### *The Spirit's Work in Separation (Paul's prayer for the Philippians)*

Paul is separated from the Philippians and yet that separation has only increased his desire to see them and his prayerful attention to their needs. Rather than being “out of sight and out of mind,” this separation from the Philippians has brought them deeper into Paul's heart (v. 7) and closer to God in his prayers. The Spirit, then, is at work in times of separation to increase our love for one another and our concern for one another expressed in lives of prayer.

### *The Spirit's Work in Persecution (Paul's affairs)*

As Paul updates the Philippians on his imprisonment, he reveals how the Spirit works in the midst of suffering. Rather than express frustration with his imprisonment, Paul focuses his attention upon the progress of the gospel. He sees how Christ is being proclaimed and finds satisfaction and confidence in that aspect of God's work. “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

Absence and persecution, thus, work to bring Paul closer to the Philippians and closer to Christ.

## Connections for Application

Our culture has two proverbs about absence that offer us two ways of life. On the one hand, we say “out of sight, out of mind,” meaning that, when something is not near to us, we have a tendency to forget about it. On the other hand, we say “absence makes the heart grow fonder,” meaning that, when something is not near to us, we have a tendency to be drawn much closer to a recognition of its value. The question for us to consider today is “Which of these proverbs applies to us as God's people, the church?” When members are absent from our midst or when we are no longer able to be present at church, which of these proverbs describes our way of life?

Absence has a way of calling our attention to the bigger picture. When a traveler remembers a journey years later, there are certain high points to the experience that are known only from afar. So, too, Paul encourages us to approach our absence from one another as a time for our hearts to grow fonder as we see the big picture. We can

see how God works through members in our midst for a time and then sends forth his people in vocational service to other places in the world. Consider one or two members who used to be at work among your people but have been called to service in other places. Take time to rejoice in the work that God did through them in your midst and pray for the work that God continues to do through them.

This fondness for one another is a work of the Spirit. Notice how Paul's absence from the Philippians shapes his memory of them in his prayer. He begins to see and recount how God is at work in their lives and prays for that work to continue.

As we think about those who are absent from us, what do we see? What work are they presently doing in the kingdom? How is God working through their vocations? What struggles might they be enduring? How can we offer support?

Identify a member who is absent and (with that member's permission) share what God has done for that person in Christ in the past and how you pray that God works for his or her life and service in the future. Absence has a way of calling our attention to the bigger picture and enabling us to see God's work in the lives of his people.

This fondness for Christ is a work of the Spirit that happens even in times of persecution. Separation from one another can be frightening because we live in a time of post-Christendom. To be alone in an environment that is not supportive of one's faith is difficult and distressing. Paul's words, however, turn our eyes to Christ. The one who has suffered and died under sin has now risen from the dead and ascended into heaven and rules over all things. Jesus cannot be dethroned by the forces of this world and, in fact, through our suffering, will continue to work and bear witness to his kingdom of grace. In connecting with one another, we are able to consider how Christ is at work in our situations of service and suffering and commend one another to his care.

### **Activity for the Week**

As the body of Christ, we intentionally care for one another, even those who are physically distant from the church.

Identify members of the congregation who are distant from the church. It could be college students, those who serve in the armed forces, shut-ins, those who are hospitalized, or delinquent members. Then, plan how the congregation can engage in Christian service to them.

One approach would be to identify some of their needs or the nature of their service to God where they are located and plan a way of extending the church's care to them. For example, the congregation could send devotional booklets to those who are distant from them with a letter witnessing to the church's spiritual care and promising that they will be held up in prayer during this week and at the next worship service.

*David Schmitt*

## **Textual Connection**

Paul's separation from the Philippians causes him to focus on that which holds them together as a community of Christ, involved in humble service to one another.

## **A Community of Christ**

Paul celebrates the community of Christ by placing Christ at the center of their fellowship. He compares their life with one another to the work of Christ and he contrasts their life with one another with the ways of the world. Thus, Paul celebrates the community of Christ through confession, comparison, and contrast.

### *Confession*

At the center of their life together is the figure of Christ. His humiliation and exaltation (2:6–11) serves as the heart of their salvation and is celebrated by Paul in the poetic language of a hymn.

### *Comparison*

This figure of Christ also serves as a reminder of the art of their life with one another. When Paul appeals to the Philippians to be united in humble self-sacrificial service to one another (2:1–5 and 12–18), he puts Christ at the center. He compares their attitude and actions to those of Christ, revealing how the Spirit of Christ is present and active in varied ways among his people in the church.

### *Contrast*

Through such humility and service, the Philippians will demonstrate that they are the “children of God,” distinct from the “crooked and twisted generation” that surrounds them (2:14–16).

## **Humble Service to One Another**

At the end of this chapter, Paul turns his attention to practical affairs in his relationship with the Philippians. He speaks about sending to them both Timothy (2:19–24) and Epaphroditus (2:25–29). In his description of these servants of God, notice how Paul highlights the love of Christ now put into action. In particular, consider the words Paul uses to describe Epaphroditus. He is “my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need” (2:25).

The people of God are intimately related to one another in a family of faith. Their fundamental relationship is one of brothers and sisters in Christ. Their work together in God's mission brings them into relationships of mutual service (συνεργόν) and mutual suffering (συστρατιώτην), carrying holy words (ἀπόστολον) and performing holy deeds (λειτουργόν) within the body of Christ.

## Connections for Application

It has always amazed me how hymns can bring people together. I remember standing around a parishioner's hospital bed in the ICU. He was dying and the family had gathered around him. After I read from the Scriptures and prayed, his sister began to sing. Softly at first. "Amazing Grace." Others slowly joined in, as much as they remembered, and, for a moment, our hymn of praise drowned out the noise of the machines. As death was about to tear us apart, this hymn joined us together for a moment in prayer and praise. The apostle Paul knew the power of a hymn. For that reason, he included a poetic piece, a "hymn to Christ," in his letter to the Philippians. Paul knew that this hymn to Christ could take their attention away from themselves, put it on Christ, and join them together in lives of self-sacrificial love.

When I looked at those who were gathered around this hospital bed singing, I realized that what brought them all to this hospital room was their relationship with the man who was dying in their midst. In a similar way, at the heart of the church stands a person. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He has gathered us together not as members of a biological family but as members of the family of God. He is the one who has come to us in the flesh, died for us under the wrath of God, and rose from the dead, so that he now lives and rules over all things for us. His life is the source of our life in him and springs forth in our lives of service to one another.

Hebrews 11 is often known as the chapter of the "heroes of faith." We read that list and we ponder the work that God has done in the lives of major figures in the Old Testament. Unfortunately, at times, these individuals can seem larger than life. The work that God has done through them is wonderful but when will you be called upon to build an ark and save the world from drowning?

That is what is so beautiful about this small chapter in Philippians. In this letter of Paul from prison, we get a glimpse of other heroes of the faith. Paul is writing about everyday matters in terms of his relationship with the church at Philippi. As he does so, the names of different people naturally come up. Their work may not seem as spectacular—caring for Paul's needs during his imprisonment, carrying a letter from Paul to the church in Philippi—but it is just as beautiful and worthy of attention in the eyes of God.

In fact, this section of Paul's letter reminds us that all you have to do is consider one person in the body of Christ and you will see a network of believers in relationship with one another. For example, the parents who brought that child to baptism, the godparents who prayed for her growth in the faith, the elderly shut-in she visited as part of her confirmation project, and the friend she witnessed to after a volleyball practice at school. You may want to do this exercise with your congregation: choose one member and demonstrate for the hearers how so many different lives are brought together in mutual service in relation to this one person.

## Activity for the Week

As the family of God, we work with one another and, through those occasions of self-sacrifice and service, God enables us to grow closer to one another in the faith. For Paul, he had learned to know Epaphroditus as a “brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need.” Using those terms, create an activity wherein the members of your congregation begin to see how they are joined together in mutual service and how they can get to know one another through the work that God is doing in their midst.

The activity could be as simple as inviting members to think about the past month or year and to write their own “letter of friendship” (e.g., email, Facebook post, or actual letter) to one person who has been a brother or sister in the faith, a fellow worker, a fellow soldier, a messenger, or a servant to their needs.

Or, the activity could be more elaborate. The congregation could intentionally identify service projects where members embody what it means to be a brother or sister in Christ, a fellow worker, a fellow soldier, a messenger, or a servant to another’s needs. After identifying those projects, the church could commission members to engage in that work on behalf of the church and then offer a summary of their experience that can be posted and shared with members of the congregation so that the body of Christ can celebrate in very concrete ways how we live and work as the family of God brought together in faith.

*David Schmitt*

## Proper 22 • Philippians 3:4b–14 • October 8, 2017

### Textual Connection

At this point in his letter, Paul opens his heart and offers a personal confession of faith to the Philippians (3:4–14): having the righteousness of Christ (3:9) changes how Paul considers his past, his present, and his future.

As Paul speaks about his life, he models for the Philippians how Christians understand their lives in Christ and the way in which they persevere in the midst of suffering and service in the world (3:15–21).

### *Confessing Christ*

This portion of the letter is saturated with Paul’s faith in Christ. At the heart of this all is the fact that “Christ Jesus has made me his own” (3:12). By this gracious act of God in Christ, Jesus has become Paul’s Lord (3:1 and 8) and Savior (3:20). Paul begins by encouraging the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord (3:1) and then reveals to them what such rejoicing sounds like. It involves boasting not in oneself but in Christ (3:3), trusting not in our righteousness through the law but in his righteousness that is ours by faith (3:9), and sharing his sufferings in this world (3:10) as we await his final revelation (3:20).

### *Re-evaluating the Past*

Because of God's work for him in Christ, Paul re-evaluates his past. He sees things differently. That which is prized by the opponents of the gospel is dismissed by Paul as a disadvantage (3:7), as something which takes his eyes away from Christ and what Christ has done for him.

### *Pressing on in the Present*

God's work in Christ also changes how Paul views his present circumstances. Christ power over all things, revealed in his resurrection, encourages Paul in times of suffering. In prison, he shares in Christ's sufferings, trusting that ultimately God will deliver him. Though the world opposes him and false teachers attack him, because of the power of Christ, Paul presses on as a runner in a race (3:12 and 14).

### *Hoping for the Future*

Finally, God's work in Christ gives Paul a glorious vision of the future. He trusts that Jesus will return and raise our bodies from the dead, transforming them to be like his glorious body, even as he renews all things.

As Paul confesses his faith, he holds on to the death, resurrection, and return of Christ and offers the Philippians an example of how the gospel shapes our lives, past, present, and future and encourages them to look for others who do the same.

## **Connections for Application**

When Kirk graduated from college, he realized that he needed to change his social media presence. He began to look at his profile, his interests, his posts, his connections, and re-evaluate them. He considered how they looked through the eyes of potential employer and tried to scrub his social media clean. For Kirk, a change in his life situation resulted in reconsideration, a re-envisioning of his past for the sake of the present and the future.

In our text, Paul undergoes a similar re-evaluation but, unlike Kirk, he does not seek to hide his past. Instead, Paul displays it. Because of Paul's clear confession of the gospel, he is freed from the endless process of self-presentation. He does not worry about what others will think of him. Instead, he boldly speaks of his past, his present, and his future in a way that confesses his faith.

Sometimes, the church presents the gospel in a very narrow way. It points only to the death of Jesus Christ on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. In this portion of his letter, Paul writes with a larger understanding of the gospel. For Paul, the good news of God's work in Christ involves not only his death, but also his resurrection, his rule and return to restore all things. When Paul sees his life through the large lens of the gospel, he reconceives his past, present, and future. Because of Christ's death, Paul lives confidently in the righteousness of Christ; because of Christ's resurrection, Paul is empowered for service in difficult circumstances, and because of Christ's

return, Paul lives in hope of the final resurrection and the restoration of all creation.

In a world of paparazzi, we are accustomed to catching popular figures in unguarded moments. We get a glimpse behind the fragile illusions of celebrity status and see what daily life looks like for these people. For some Christians, their life of faith is like the fragile image of celebrity status. It involves carefully crafted moments of religious activities. They need to demonstrate to others that they live uprightly, that they are patient and loving, that they give to the poor, and that their lives are filled with God's blessing. Such Christians live in fear of one small slip, because then the illusion would be shattered.

For us, the apostle Paul's self-revelation is a blessing. He takes us behind the scenes of celebrity status to see what a true Christian's life looks like. As Christians, our confidence lies not in our works but in the work of Christ. His death forgives us from sin and therefore we treasure and remember our baptism. His resurrection empowers our living, and therefore we press on in the present struggles. We live sacrificially in a world of consumption, we seek the interests of Christ in a world of self-interest, and we participate in the community of Christ in a world of individuals. Finally, his promised return to restore all things gives us hope. While we labor in his kingdom, we look not to the results of our work to justify our efforts, but rather turn to his promise, trusting that in his time, he will return and restore all things.

### **Activity for the Week**

As the family of God, we are united in Christ, and this changes how we live. For the apostle Paul, it caused him to re-evaluate his past, to press on in his present circumstances, and to foster hope for the future.

Using this three-fold perspective of Paul, identify and sponsor activities that support your members in re-evaluating their past, pressing on in the present, and being filled with hope for the future.

For example, in re-evaluating the past, you could establish a program wherein members are sent a card of remembrance on their baptismal birthdays or you could encourage a congregational small group to spend some time this week sharing with one another how we reconsider our past and remember Christ's work in our lives.

For pressing on in the present, identify how members can offer support to those involved in a communal or vocational effort where there are struggles. It could be something as simple as a prayer request or something more involved like organizing an appreciation day for such workers.

For having hope for the future, you could identify those who have lost loved ones within the past year and encourage members to pay them a visit, give them a call, or send them a card to converse with them and to reaffirm the hope we have in the resurrection of the body and God's promise of eternal life in the new creation.

*David Schmitt*

### **Textual Connection**

In Paul's closing exhortations, he encourages the Philippians in their devotion to Christ, in their support of one another, and in their engagement with the world.

Inside the church, some of the workers are not in agreement (4:2). Outside the church, there was opposition, affecting the Philippians (1:28) but also putting Paul in prison. Such circumstances could lead to fear and fragmentation among believers. Yet, rather than be opposed to one another and opposed to the world, Paul encourages them to stand firm in Christ (4:1), and, from there, to practice mutual support of one another (4:2–3 and 10–20) and discerning engagement with the world (4:4–9).

### *Standing Firm in Christ*

By appealing for them to “stand firm thus in the Lord,” Paul echoes his concerns throughout the letter. Repeatedly, Paul has brought all things back to Jesus Christ, the crucified one, who is risen from the dead and now rules as Lord over all things. Once again, Paul encourages them that the Lord is near, both in terms of his second coming (4:5) which they eagerly await, and in terms of his present peace (4:7 and 9), in which they currently rest.

### *Offering Mutual Support*

Standing firm, however, did not mean inaction. It meant action. It involved mutual support among the faithful as they entered into God's bold engagement with the world. Earlier Paul associated standing firm with “striving side by side” (1:27), so it should not surprise us that, when Paul is confronted with disagreement among workers, he points to the Lord (the true source of agreement) and reminds them of their mutual work in the gospel (4:2–3). As he closes his letter, Paul reminds them of their bold ventures in supporting his missionary labor (4:10–20). Though persecuted and scattered, the church is not dying. It is standing firm and engaging in mutual support.

### *Engaging with the World*

In addition, standing firm involved discerning engagement with the world. Rather than retreat from the world or only fight against it, Paul encourages a bold entry into it that involves careful thought and faithful action. The Philippians are encouraged to find that which is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise and consider these things (4:8) even as they put faith into action by following the example of the apostle Paul (4:9). Through such engagement, God will work in mission. This is testified by the fact that, even now, some of “Caesar's household” have been brought to the faith and send their greetings to their extended family in Christ with the apostle Paul (4:22).

## Connections for Application

A Christian media consultant once noted that he had never come across a person who joined a church because they read something negative and mean-spirited on their blog. From his experience, no new member ever said, “I just loved the way you trashed those other Christians and thought ‘I have to be a part of that church.’” Unfortunately, however, opposition tends to bring out the worst in the church. Arguments within the church and conflicts with the culture can lead to speech that filled with “anger, malice, wrath, slander, and obscene talk” (Col 3:7). Hatred is masked as zeal for the truth and, when those who are outside the church are asked what it means to be a Christian, the first thing that comes to their mind is not “see how they love one another” (Jn 13:35) but rather “see how they fight with one another and with the world.” The research of Kinnaman and Lyons (*unChristian*) offers a glimpse into this phenomenon. We seem to have lost sight of the way of love as enacted and encouraged in Philippians by the apostle Paul.

Paul confronts a situation that is filled with strife. There is internal argument among members in the church in Philippi and there is external opposition, leading to his imprisonment. Yet, in this midst of this, Paul focuses on the work of Christ and from that focus he encourages God’s people to be the family of God distinguished by three qualities: they are united in Christ, they support one another, and they are engaged in work in the world.

In this portion of the letter, Paul repeatedly uses the phrase “in the Lord” or “in Christ Jesus.” His words call to mind the manifold gifts that God has given by joining us to Christ. Some churches have “living baptismal fonts” in which there is a continuous flow of water. That image captures the way in which God’s gifts are continually poured out upon us through our baptism in Christ. In Christ Jesus, we are brought into a sure and certain relationship with God (1:1), into a way of life that involves self-sacrificial service for the other (1:2), into joy in all circumstances (1:4 and 10), into peace and protection (4:7), and into holiness before God (4:21).

As Paul encourages the Philippians to be in support of one another, he recalls the past. He recounts for them the way in which they worked with him in missionary endeavors over the years (4:3 and 14–20). For Paul, there is wisdom in a church remembering its past. God’s people can see in very concrete ways how God works, through mutual support, in the family of Christ. Consider how the Lord has worked within your congregation in the past, providing your people with a memory of mutual support in the mission of God.

As Paul envisions the church engaged in the world, he encourages the Philippians to find that which is good and true and worthy of praise and to affirm such things. Critical engagement with the culture does not only have to be by opposition. It can also be by affirmation of that which is good. God has so ordered the world that people serve as masks of God in their vocations. Using Paul’s list of terms, consider the actions of others in the world and highlight concrete example

of such things that Christians can affirm (e.g., the honor given to those who have offered their lives in sacrificial service to others; the praise due to those who care for their children or the world around them, etc.). While we don't want to turn a blind eye to areas where we stand firm in the faith in opposition to culture, we certainly don't want to forget that there remain many good and noble things which we, as Christians, can affirm.

### **Activity for the Week**

As the body of Christ, we gather for worship and we enter the world for work in our vocations.

Much of the church's interaction with the world is in opposition to what is happening there, and understandably so. But there are places where the church can engage with others in a supportive way. We can affirm the good that is being done (Phil 4:8) and, by our work and our witness, point to that which is godly.

Identify a work within the community that is good. This could be a food drive for a local food pantry, support for a women's shelter, home-delivered meals for those returning from the hospital, a neighborhood clean-up effort at the local park, or a welcome effort for immigrant families. Then organize a volunteer effort from your congregation to join with others in service, which affirms that which is good.

*David Schmitt*

### **Proper 24 • 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10 • October 22, 2017**

This Sunday begins a series of several weeks in which the Epistle readings are taken from 1 Thessalonians. In this *lectio continua* much of the content of Paul's letter is covered. This provides the opportunity for an expository sermon series based on the appointed Epistle readings from 1 Thessalonians.

The series of sermons is entitled "Fatherly Encouragement." Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians is essentially a missive in which he provides encouragement to the young church. It continues Paul's original ministry in their midst in which "like a father with his children we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory" (2:11–12).

Since Paul's original visit to Thessalonica, during which he planted the church, was relatively brief (see Acts 17:1–10), he desires to provide encouragement and guidance to the new Christians there. The apostle started this congregation, and he views himself as the spiritual father to the new converts. Though absent in body, he writes to give instruction, assurance, and encouragement so that the believers continue to grow in faith and faithful living.

### **Schedule of the Sermon Series Themes**

Fatherly Encouragement toward Imitation (1:1–10)

Fatherly Encouragement toward Motivation (2:1–13)

Fatherly Encouragement toward Sanctification (3:11–4:12)

Fatherly Encouragement toward Expectation (4:13–18)

## **Fatherly Encouragement toward Imitation**

### *Focus Statement*

The example of faith and faithfulness that Christians demonstrate invites imitation by others.

### *Function Statement*

That the hearer may model faith and faithfulness resulting in its replication by others.

### *Introduction*

“Like Father, like son.” This adage expresses the age-old phenomenon of young toddlers imitating their parents. A little boy pushes the toy plastic lawn mower behind his father, or smears whipped cream on his face in an effort to copy dad shaving. A little girl dresses up with her mother’s clothes or imitates mom as she talks on the phone. It is natural and healthy for children to imitate their parents.

The Christians in Thessalonica were young in the faith. Paul had planted the church there only a couple of years earlier, but he was forced to leave them due to attacks against him by unbelievers. In this epistle he brings encouragement to these Christians to continue to grow in their faith in Christ. As their spiritual father, he encourages them to imitate him so that others might in turn imitate them.

### **Sermon Outline**

- I. The process of imitation brings replication of Christian faith.
  - A. God chose the Thessalonian Christians by the Gospel delivered through Paul’s words and supported by his deeds.
    1. Paul spoke the word of the Gospel and modeled the life of faith (1:4–5).
    2. The Thessalonians imitated the examples of Paul and of the Lord (1:6).
  - B. The Thessalonian believers became models for others to imitate.
    1. They were examples to others in nearby Greece (1:7)
    2. They became examples of faith to others everywhere (1:8).
  - C. God continues to pass on the faith through the witness of Christians today.
    1. Mature Christians witness the faith and model faithful living.
    2. Learning believers imitate the life which is modeled.
- II. That which is passed on and imitated is faith and faithful living.
  - A. The Thessalonians displayed faith, love, and hope (1:2–3).

- B. Others observed the Thessalonians' conversion, ministry, and hope in Christ (1:9–10).
- C. We today pass on the faith to future generations by modelling faithfulness for others to imitate.

*David Peter*

**Proper 25 • 1 Thessalonians 2:1–13 • October 29, 2017**

This is the second in a series of sermons based on texts from 1 Thessalonians. The series is entitled “Fatherly Encouragement.” Paul writes as the spiritual father to his children who need guidance and encouragement to grow in faith and faithful living.

**Fatherly Encouragement toward Motivation**

*Focus Statement*

The motivation for advancing God’s mission derives from God’s love to us and through us to others.

*Function Statement*

That the hearer may serve God and others from right motives.

*Introduction*

Every parent knows the challenge of motivating their children to do what is assigned to them. It may involve the kids’ daily chores, nightly homework, and regular responsibilities. Parents want their children not only to carry out these duties, but also to do so with the right motives.

The Christians in Thessalonica were young in the faith. In this epistle the Apostle Paul brings encouragement to these believers to continue the mission which he began in their midst. As their spiritual father, he calls them to carry out God’s mission from right motives, and he models those motives in his own ministry to them.

**Sermon Outline**

- I. The task of mission is to declare the gospel of God.
  - A. God’s mission is to declare the good news centered in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (2:1–2).
  - B. Our mission is one of good news centered in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
- II. The motivation for mission is from love.
  - A. There are many impure motives to carry out God’s mission.
    - 1. Paul’s appeal did not arise from error, impurity, deception, people-pleasing, flattery, greed, or personal glory (2:3–6).
    - 2. Our motives for doing the Lord’s work should not be self-serving.

- B. The right motivation for mission derives from genuine love.
  - 1. Paul was moved to minister to the Thessalonians by his affection for them and their endearment to him (2:7–8)
  - 2. Paul modeled ministry and mission that was rightly motivated (2:9–12).
  - 3. Our service is motivated by God’s love to us and through us to others.
- III. The result of mission is the reception of the life-giving word of God.
  - A. The Thessalonians received the word of God which worked in them faith and service (2:13).
  - B. We continue to gladly hear and learn God’s word and share it with others.

*David Peter*

**Proper 26 • 1 Thessalonians 3:11–4:12 • November 5, 2017**

This sermon is the third in a series, entitled “Fatherly Encouragement,” based on texts from 1 Thessalonians. In this epistle the Apostle Paul encourages the Christians of Thessalonica who are young in the faith. He acts as their spiritual father. Today’s theme is based on 1 Thessalonians 3:11–4:12.

**Fatherly Encouragement toward Sanctification**

*Focus Statement*

Sanctification is God’s will for how we live and is empowered by him.

*Function Statement*

That the hearer may grow in sanctified living.

*Introduction*

Every parent has hopes for their children. We want our kids to grow up to be responsible and productive adults. Parents provide guidance and encouragement to their children regarding how they are to live.

The Apostle Paul considered the Christians at Thessalonica to be his spiritual children. He was like a father to them. Appropriately, he had hopes for them—that they grow in the will of the Lord. Paul states frankly, “This is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thes 4:3).

God’s desire is for our sanctification as well. The text today gives us guidance and encouragement regarding how we are to live sanctified lives.

**Sermon Outline**

- I. The meaning of sanctification is to please God in how we live.
  - A. Paul is concerned with sanctification, or “how we ought to live” (4:1).
  - B. Sanctification is a process – “as you are doing” —and involves progress—

- “more and more” (4:1).
  - C. Sanctification is God’s will for us, and it pleases Him (4:1, 3).
  - D. Sanctification is only possible through union with Christ—“in the Lord Jesus...through the Lord Jesus” (4:1–2).
- II. The modes of sanctification involve morality and ethics.
- A. Sanctification involves sexual purity (4:3–8).
  - B. Sanctification involves brotherly charity (4:9–10).
  - C. Sanctification involves civil productivity (4:11–12).
- III. The means of sanctification is the Lord Himself.
- A. The Lord empowers us to increase and abound in love for others (3:12).
  - B. The Lord establishes us blameless in holiness before God (3:13).

*David Peter*

**Proper 27 • 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 • November 12, 2017**

This sermon is the fourth in the sermon series entitled “Fatherly Encouragement.” It is based on 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. The Apostle Paul addresses the Thessalonian Christians as his dear children, giving them encouragement in their journey of faith in Jesus.

**Fatherly Encouragement toward Expectation**

*Focus Statement*

An informed expectation of Christ’s return brings hope and encouragement to the believer as he faces his death and the death of loved ones.

*Function Statement*

That the hearer grows in the confident hope of Christ’s return.

*Introduction*

Little children are not immune to the shock and horror of the death of loved ones. They may experience the loss of a grandparent to heart failure or the death of a classmate due to an automobile accident. Inevitably they wonder if their loved one who died is safe. They wonder if she will live again.

The Thessalonian Christians, who were still young in their faith, held similar concerns. Some of their loved ones had died. Apparently they had expected that Jesus would return before any believer died. So now they are perplexed about the destiny of their deceased Christian family and friends. They wonder if their beloved dead will be safe and will live again.

St. Paul writes to these confused Christians to provide them with comfort and hope. He encourages them by pointing them to the promises that God has made regarding the glorious reappearing of His Son, Jesus Christ. These same words bring great encouragement and hope to us who face the tyranny of death.

## Sermon Outline

- I. An uninformed expectation about the future is a hopeless one.
  - A. Paul addresses a misconception that believers who die will miss Christ's glorious appearing (4:13).
  - B. Misconceptions about death and the afterlife are held by many today, leading to no hope or false hope beyond the grave.
- II. The enlightened expectation about the future is filled with hope and confidence.
  - A. This hopeful expectation for the future is based on a past event—the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (4:14a).
  - B. This hope-filled expectation focuses on a future event—the glorious coming (Parousia) of Jesus Christ (4:14b–15).
  - C. The reappearing of Christ will follow a clear sequence which provides comfort and encouragement.
    - 1. The Lord will descend from heaven visibly and audibly (4:16a).
    - 2. Those who have died with faith in Christ will be raised from death (4:16b).
    - 3. Those believers who are alive will be gathered in the air for the triumphal procession (4:17a).
    - 4. All believers will forever be with the Lord (4:17b).
  - D. We confidently trust God's promise of future resurrection.
- III. The expectation of Christ's return brings encouragement (4:18).
  - A. The message of Jesus's return in glory comforts and encourages us.
  - B. We now encourage others with this message of the final victory over death.

*David Peter*

# *Reviews*

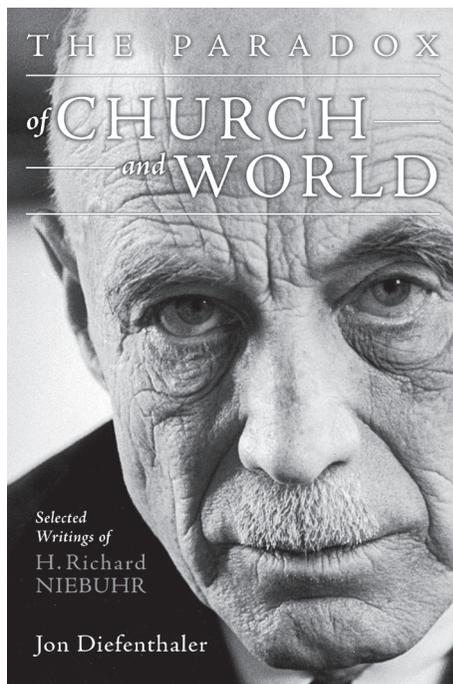


**THE PARADOX OF CHURCH AND  
WORLD: Selected Writings of**

**H. Richard Niebuhr.** Edited by Jon  
Diefenthaler. Fortress Press, 2015. 534  
pages. Paper. \$44.00.

A Niebuhr renaissance of sorts has brought renewed attention to both of the famous brothers. A documentary from Martin Doblmeier, *American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story* aired on PBS outlets this spring. The film came not long after an anthology, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics*, edited by his daughter that could be a textbook for a class on the “public theologian.” While Reinhold often seems to be the more celebrated sibling, younger brother H. Richard Niebuhr certainly deserves time in the spotlight as well. This well-done volume edited by Jon Diefenthaler certainly should help make that happen.

A convoluted relationship of church and world has challenged Christians since New Testament times. While Reinhold had plenty to say in a number of writings, readers have tended to encounter H. Richard Niebuhr’s perspective on the matter most often via his well-known *Christ and Culture* with its five paradigms that examine Christ against, of, above, in paradox with, and transforming culture. While Niebuhr’s options already are clear in the book, because context counts, we do well to take advantage of a wider, deeper view of the man and his thought to understand better these famous pairings. Diefenthaler provides just such a view in



*The Paradox of Church and World: Selected Writings of H. Richard Niebuhr.*

With his earlier biography, Diefenthaler already had served well those interested in H. Richard. Now comes a wide selection of texts, accompanied by editorial introductions, that sample Niebuhr’s thought from his seminary days to the end of his career. Some of these are not well known but certainly useful for the color and nuance they add to Niebuhr’s lifelong focus on church and world. For example, the early ones from his Eden Seminary days during World War I read like student essays, perhaps a bit over-written, yet marked with genuine concern for those involved in the conflict, particularly for his seminary classmates. A few years later, when serving as his church body’s

Sunday school executive, Niebuhr opted not to cheerlead for the same old take on the matter when he reported to the synod convention. Instead he composed a thoughtful appeal to rethink and retool his church's approach to catechesis, laying out a detailed plan that would affect both faith and life. At the other end of his career (he died in 1962 and so did not live to see the beginning of denominational slide in the next decade), Niebuhr already was concerned about a church losing steam and focus as part of what was becoming post-church America. Selections in this collection are worth reading for their take on issues at hand, and because taken together they add to Niebuhr's famous templates for looking at Christ and culture.

While the texts themselves shed light on Niebuhr's thinking, they are even more useful when framed by Diefenthaler's introductions. A lot is packed into these, both in terms of information and in his analysis of what was happening in the changing culture. Diefenthaler's introduction sets out key themes in Niebuhr's theology and particularly in the writings chosen for the volume. There is a broader look at the historiography of Niebuhr studies, and Diefenthaler comments especially on both critics and supporters, some disputing Niebuhr's assessments and questioning his approach, others praising Niebuhr's judgment and insights. The general introduction is very useful in pegging Niebuhr then and now. Moving on to Niebuhr's texts themselves, Diefenthaler offers additional comments on these writings grouped

to highlight Niebuhr's formative years, the Depression era, and World War II and its aftermath. Circumstances changed greatly over time, yet Niebuhr maintained his focus on Christian faith and life exercised not only individually but also always tied to the household of faith as well as the wider world.

Big ideas abound in Niebuhr's texts. One, for example, that is hardly upbeat but could stand more attention these days is sin and its effect on the anthropology that informs Niebuhr's outlook. We hear politicians promise to end this or that evil and set society right, but Niebuhr is more frank in his assessment of human nature: fallen and in no condition to save oneself, let alone wider society. That sober perspective will not win elections or garner many votes from those who prefer to wish upon a star. Instead, the answer for H. Richard Niebuhr came not in promising a utopia but rather (to borrow a line from brother Reinhold) in "finding proximate solutions to insoluble problems."

Some today would have religion mustered out of the public square, consigned and confined offstage instead, a matter only of private opinion. But freedom of religion was not intended to be freedom from religion, and since the country's beginning, "public theology" was supposed to be given a place at the table. Stephen Carter's book *The Culture of Disbelief* reminded us of that already years ago. He was seconding what H. Richard Niebuhr had already maintained. To make his case, Niebuhr spent much time immersed in history and then encouraged Christians to

have their say in the public forum. The writings in Diefenthaler's volume cover a shorter span—just Niebuhr's lifetime. But even that was quite a stretch: from one world conflict through the frantic 1920s and dismal 1930s through yet another war and then the sometimes confusing mixed signals of the peace that followed. But throughout the ebb and flow, Niebuhr as seen in this volume provides a model for rolling up one's sleeves and having a say. There is an appreciation of past heritage while living in the lively present.

Along the way are things to quibble about when it comes to Niebuhr's theology. The brothers grew up amid protestant liberalism coming out of the nineteenth century. That influence is not hard to see. But in at least one respect H. Richard was post-liberal, shedding the positive, optimistic anthropology as well as the grand cultural expectations that had been so prominent until dashed by the Great War. Although brought down to earth, the Niebuhr seen in these essays is still in some ways hopeful yet clear-eyed when considering what finally can and cannot be done about the problems, challenges, and opportunities in this life. Even when taking issue with Niebuhr's theology in some particular points, in a general way he provides a model prompting Lutherans to take stock again of their own theology, not just in theory but also in practice. If Christians take seriously the idea that this world is God's and that he has not given up on it, then there is work to do. To that end, the personal and professional view of public theologian H. Richard Niebuhr

put forth by Diefenthaler's volume serves as a reminder to address the world with the word in season and out. Church and world are joined in paradox, one that, short of the Parousia, will not be resolved but must always be engaged, a lesson driven home in this worthwhile volume.

*Robert Rosin*

**PAUL AND THE STORIES OF ISRAEL: Grand Thematic Narratives in Galatians.** *By A. Andrew Das. Fortress Press, 2016. 304 pages. Hardcover. \$79.00.*

Andrew Das has produced another significant book that addresses a basic, contemporary interpretive issue. It has become common practice to appeal to an underlying story or stories in the interpretation of Paul's letters. These "grand thematic narratives" (a useful description that Das takes up from Stanley Porter) are to be understood as keys that unlock fundamental aspects of Paul's thought that otherwise would remain concealed to us. The validity of such readings of Paul are dependent to a considerable extent on the imagination of the interpreter who opens up the text by means of a story that had been hidden, or at least largely overlooked, until that interpreter happened upon the key. Judging such interpretations depends to no small extent on the degree to which they "satisfy" an overall reading of the text—and the reader. The proof is to a considerable measure in the pudding. The problem is that the tastes of interpreters and their readers are no sure guide to the text.

That is not to say that no guidelines

have been offered. Das properly reviews the seven helpful criteria offered by Richard Hays in a 1984 doctoral dissertation that provided initial momentum to the fresh reading of Paul against the background of a subtextual narrative (16–20). Nevertheless a “grand thematic narrative” hidden as it is behind the text remains (like a little learning) a dangerous thing. Indeed, one may question the entire enterprise of searching for a key to the text behind the text. It is not clear to me that this attempt to delve into Paul’s thought is any more valid than earlier attempts to understand the apostle by probing his psyche. There is something to be said for taking the apostle at his word. Why not focus on the argument itself—an argument which often contains appeals to the Scripture that are at once surprising and profound? To take such an approach does not at all require that one surrender a “grand narrative.” But such a narrative will take a very different form from current readings of Paul.

Das engages in precisely this task by examining six proposals of “grand thematic narratives” that have been unearthed in Galatians: (1) the influx of the nations into Zion; (2) covenant; (3) the Aqedah; (4) the Exodus; (5) the Spirit as the cloud in the wilderness; (6) the emperor cult. He examines them in close exegesis, paying attention to the text itself and finds them (in my judgment, rightly) wanting. Most (although not all) of his arguments are persuasive. All are well argued, and where it is appropriate, all are remarkably well supported against background of early Jewish interpretation

of Scripture (and, in the last instance, the emperor-cult in the Greco-Roman world). One might have wished for a further category of Israel’s return from exile, but that exercise most likely would require a volume of its own. Anyone who is reading Galatians and wrestling with current narrative interpretation of Paul (which is almost unavoidable if one is using current commentaries), will profit from Das’s work.

In the conclusion of his work, Das presses in several ways for greater rigor in the appeal to “narratives” behind Paul’s thought: (1) any narrative reading ought to be firmly anchored in clear quotations or allusions; (2) the capacity of the audience (or lack thereof) to recognize an allusion should be given greater weight than sometimes is done; (3) early Jewish use of the texts and traditions and the “second Temple trajectories” that they entail ought to be considered closely; (4) Paul’s possible subversion of narratives ought to be taken into account: Paul may overturn early Jewish traditions, rather than presupposing them; (5) one must be aware of the danger of overenthusiasm: a faint echo of a text or tradition should not serve as the warrant for a controlling narrative framework (6) one must be aware of the danger of “illegitimate totality transfer,” that is, wholesale transfer of a tradition on the basis of a mere allusion.

As Das indicates, there is a path forward, particularly if one takes care to make sure that a narrative is truly present within the text. This final suggestion is significant, perhaps in a way that Das did not have in mind (but with which

I think he may agree). The controlling narrative in Galatians, one that appears on the very surface of the text, is the story of Christ, the Son of God sent forth by God to be born of a woman, born under the law, who gave himself for our sins that he might rescue us from the present evil age, and who lives as risen Lord in all who believe. Might it not be that Paul finds all the stories of Israel (and beyond) to find their interpretation in this controlling narrative? In this case, metalepsis takes place not by a newer story taking up an older one, but by older stories “taking up” in advance the newer, and final one. To follow this path is to take our clue from Paul, who understood the Scripture to preach the gospel in advance to Abraham.

*Mark A. Seifrid*

### **THE END OF WHITE CHRISTIAN**

**AMERICA.** By Robert P. Jones.

*Simon and Schuster, 2016. 309 pages.*

*Hardcover. \$28.00.*

While the total membership of Lutheran congregations in America is overwhelmingly white, Robert P. Jones in this book scarcely mentions any of our denominational families in his tale of the demise of this portion of the nation’s Christian population. Nevertheless, *The End of White Christian America* can serve as a microscope under which Lutherans, for the sake of their future in America, might do well to take a closer look at themselves and re-evaluate various aspects of their current behavior.

Like Mark Twain, the representatives

of the White Christian America (WCA) that Jones does in fact target might feel compelled to state that their obituary has been “greatly exaggerated.” At the same time, his book clearly shows that this is the destiny that awaits them and their once-powerful institutions. Particularly effective are the anecdotal “images” that Jones projects for us at the beginning of each of his chapters in order to make his case. The most telling of these appears in his opening chapter, where he draws our attention to the United Methodist Building in Washington, DC; the Interchurch Center next to Union Seminary in New York, and Robert Schuller’s Crystal Cathedral in California—three once formidable WCA “monuments” that now have been reduced to mere “memorials” to its

# The End of White Christian America

Robert P. Jones

CEO, Public Religion Research Institute

past. As the CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute, Jones also supports the book's thesis with plenty of statistical data. Whereas 51 percent of Americans identified themselves as white Christians in 1993, this same number shrank to 32 percent in 2014. Mitt Romney, therefore, could do better than George W. Bush (2004) and John McCain (2008) with WCA voters, but still lose the presidential election of 2012 by a substantial margin.

So what is it that has put WCA on this downward trajectory? Jones states that the chief reason is not just the lower birth rates among whites. One must include the massive loss of younger members of their congregations to disaffiliation. Because of these trends, the median age of white Protestants has climbed from 46 in 1972 to 53 today. Moreover, the conservative white evangelical denominations that experienced significant growth in the 1970s and 80s have been on a declining path for several decades, and as Jones points out, they are at present losing more ground than mainline Protestants. He also notes that the trend is no different among white Roman Catholics, and that an astounding 13 percent of Americans self-identify as "former Catholics."

In order to illustrate WCA's current dilemma, Jones focuses on two controversial social issues. The first is gay marriage, upheld by the US Supreme Court decision of 2015 and gaining support from Americans across generations. Religious conservatives who fit the WCA profile face, or so Jones contends, a "profound identity

crisis." The more obvious options of "acceptance" or "last stands" against gay marriage both carry risk of further membership losses. Jones highlights the "religious liberty insurgency," a WCA army that sees the same-sex culture war as lost, but seeks to use the First Amendment to uphold the traditional understanding of marriage within their own communities and to make this a deal-breaker in their service and business dealings with LGBT couples. As Jones sees it, this third strategy amounts to a form of "conditional surrender" that has little prospect of much long-lasting success because most Americans have little appetite for discrimination based on personal religious beliefs.

The other issue troubling WCA to which this book devotes an entire chapter is race. Reared in Georgia as a Southern Baptist (SBC), Jones scores this Protestant behemoth for its complicit role in "America's fraught racial history." He points out that not until 1995 was there any recognition or apology on the part of the SBC for its endorsement of slavery and its failure to support the civil rights movement. Moreover, its tendency is still to relegate racial issues to the realm of "individualistic theology." More useful is Jones's analysis of the "perception gap" between whites and blacks in America due to self-segregated neighborhoods, the lack of integrated social networks, and the absence of institutions (churches included) that create opportunities for the members of these same races to interact with each other. He also states that this "gap," plus the legacy of racial injustice in America,

makes racial reconciliation a long-term project, involving many honest conversations taking place over time and ushering blacks and whites alike into “the uncharted terrain of remembering, repentance, and repair.” More open-minded WCA churches often believe that there is, or ought to be, a “shortcut.” But Jones warns that they will not find one.

Perhaps the most intriguing feature of this book is Jones’s “eulogy” for WCA. Here he employs Elisabeth Kuebler-Ross’s “stages of grief” in the hopes of aiding our understanding of the various responses to its impending death in both the liberal and conservative camps of American Protestantism. Some of his examples might be a stretch, but Franklin Graham’s “anger,” the Mississippi legislative effort to strike a “bargain” by making the Bible the state book, and “hospice chaplain” Stanley Hauerwas’s attempts to address WCA’s “depression,” offer a perspective that is fresh and worthy of further conversation. Of equal interest are Jones’s categorization and critique of the various “visions” being proposed as a way forward for mainliners and for conservative evangelicals.

On the other hand, Jones rebukes those who are ready to dance on the grave of WCA. He sees promising signs of “life after death.” One of these is an ending of the fusion of Christianity with partisan American politics and the arrival of theological reassessment of the church’s role in the world. Now might be an opportunity for Lutherans, overlooked in this book, to make a strong and positive contribution.

*Jon Diefenthaler*

**CHRISTIAN CONCEPTS FOR CARE: Understanding and Helping People with Mental Health Issues.** By David J. Ludwig and Mary R. Jacob. Concordia Publishing House, 2014. 272 pages. Paper. \$26.99.

A pastor friend recently sent me a link to a research study that surveyed seventy seminaries in North America from fourteen church traditions. The study discovered that seminaries, in general, fail to teach their graduates adequately about the mental health issues that will plague their future parishioners. While 88 percent of the surveyed seminaries offered courses in which mental health topics were addressed in some way, seminaries were more likely to offer additional coursework in pre-marital/couples counseling and grief counseling than they were to offer courses specifically about mental illness.

Ludwig and Jacob have authored a book, *Christian Concepts for Care*, that should help fill that void for pastors serving their congregations and for seminaries.

The authors first lay a strong theological foundation for what causes mental illnesses, as well as how the gospel of Christ can help address those causes. I have read many books purporting to be about Christian counseling, but too many lack any direct gospel driven counseling strategies. Ludwig and Jacob do focus on how the gospel can be used to help everyone, including those struggling with various mental disorders. While I might have preferred to see

more Bible verses suggested to be used in particular vignettes in the last half of the book, in the early chapters the authors did an excellent job of establishing their biblical and theological foundations for our mental health struggles in this life, and how agape and the new life in Christ (gospel) can heal our “damaged spiritual DNA.” They strongly focus on how a faith community (congregation) can be a strategically important source of spiritual healing and growth for those who struggle with depression, anxiety, personality disorders, addiction, and even psychotic disorders. The authors also do an excellent job of interspersing personal stories that apply the concepts.

The authors also do an admirable job of teaching how congregations, and not just church workers or counselors, can be involved in caring for their fellow members who struggle with mental disorders. Many Christian books have focused on what the pastor can do, or what the family can do, to help those who struggle with mental health issues, but fewer are designed to help congregations engage in their care. Parishioners are often willing to visit a fellow member who has a “physical illness” like heart disease or cancer, but too many are afraid to help comfort and encourage their fellow members who are depressed or addicted. This book could be used by pastors to help teach lay people how they can and should reach out to those struggling with mental illness. There are very fine chapters about developing wellness ministries, caregiving by laity, and partnering with community professionals.

In any book that is covering a large swathe (like mental illness and theology), generalities must be used. I found their generalities about the primary causes of particular mental illnesses were very defensible, but there were times that I wished they had couched their language more tentatively (e.g., often, in many cases, frequently). Less sophisticated readers not well versed in the complexities of mental illness might wrongly conclude a person has particular symptoms because of an event that happened to them at a particular stage of childhood. But the authors do an outstanding job of covering many of the major mental disorder categories and how fellow Christians and the gospel can be used to bring comfort to the “broken reed.” That is a challenge to try to do in just one 270-page book.

I greatly appreciated the “Interlude” between the two major parts of the book. In this, a Christian woman describes her “encounter with serious mental illness and the role of her faith and the Christian community in her journey.” She wrote poignantly and helps the reader get a more empathic sense of who fellow Christians can be helping, and that the ultimate glue holding us all together is the Trinity God who loves us.

A couple of smaller suggestions if there is a revision: First, in chapter 8, a “Wellness Circle” is described, but not shown. I think I’ve seen the particular circle that they describe, but it would be helpful for readers to actually see the figure than to simply have it described. Perhaps the publisher opted not to include a diagram because of the

complications and expense of including them, but I think this diagram would have been particularly helpful, at a minimum in an appendix. Second, in a vignette (112), they used the common term “committed suicide” instead of, what I and others have grown to prefer, “death by suicide.” The term “committed suicide” probably stems from times when suicide was considered a crime (we do rightly speak of persons “committing crimes”). I use this little critique as an opportunity to teach any reader of this review to strive to change this implicitly judgmental terminology about suicide. Elsewhere in the book they do avoid using the term.

While written by Lutherans and published by Concordia Publishing House, I hope that this book is read and used by pastors, seminaries, and lay Christians of other faith traditions. I believe they would greatly benefit from what it teaches about the healing presence of Christ.

*Richard Marrs*

**FROM ATHEISM TO CHRISTIANITY:  
The Story of C. S. Lewis.** By Joel D.

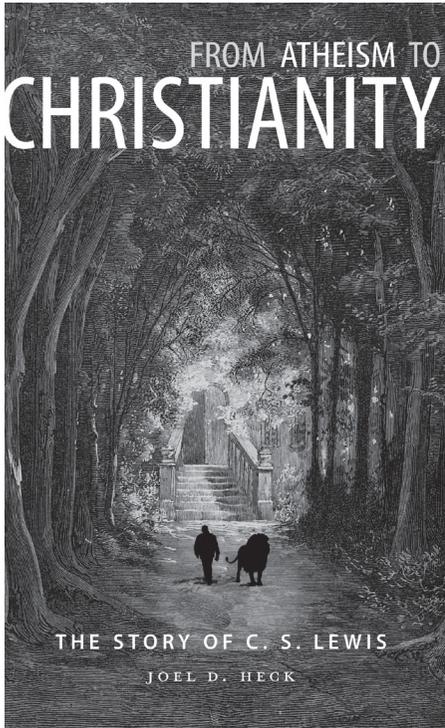
*Heck. Concordia Publishing House, 2017.  
Paper. 214 pages. \$14.99.*

As the title suggests, this book charts C. S. Lewis’s journey from atheism—through a maze of other “isms”—to Christianity. Dr. Heck deals in detail with the causes (events, books, people) of each of the stages in Lewis’s transformation, even supplying in some instances the precise year, day, and hour

at which certain developments occurred. (See, for example, pages 102–103.) Such thoroughness and precision must have required painstaking and voluminous research. The subsequent book is a stellar example of scholarship in the best sense of the word, minus the connotations of pedantry and boredom that the word “scholarship” may carry for some readers.

To help his readers negotiate the wealth of information supplied, Heck uses a principle of organization once employed by Lewis himself to chart his transformation from atheism to the Christian faith, the principle of moves in a game of chess: (1) the loss of the first bishop, (2) the loss of the second bishop, (3) check, (4) checkmate (Preface, x). Although not exactly an outline, this principle, nevertheless, gives shape to the presentation of the materials in chapters 1 through 7 (especially chapters 3–7). As an aid to memory, chapter 8 provides a succinct and dynamic overview of the materials contained in the preceding chapters. As a sort of appendix (wisely not called that), the final chapter and the conclusion contain interesting and helpful insights on understanding and approaching atheists.

Equally helpful is the author’s unaffected, uncluttered, “just the facts” style, punctuated by occasional, memorable gems, such as “Barfield destroyed Lewis’s chronological snobbery and, as a result, [Lewis] forever understood that later is not always better, that newer is not always truer, that more recent is not necessarily more decent, that one must decide the truth of a matter on the basis of its merits



rather than on the basis of fashion” (94). Or this quip by the author in reaction to Lewis’s awareness of having become a Christian upon his arrival at a zoo near Oxford: “He [Lewis] had solved the problem of an internal zoo of lusts during an external trip to a zoo of animals” (183). These quotations—occasional oases in a desert? No! But, rather, pleasing variations in a well-landscaped topography.

On a more subjective note, I found Heck’s comments on Lewis’s poems and on his concept of Joy especially helpful to a Lewis aficionado like myself. Not much has been written (Don King excepted) on Lewis’s superb, theologically meaty poetry. It was not Dr. Heck’s purpose, of course, to explicate Lewis’s poems; he

was concerned only with their expression of either Lewis’s atheism or, eventually, Lewis’s Christian faith. Unwittingly, though, Heck in his comments enhanced my appreciation and understanding of some of the Lewis poems I teach in a seminary classroom.

Much has been written, however, about Lewis’s concept of Joy (alias Desire or *Sehnsucht*). This concept may be defined as an intense and pleasurable longing for something beyond human experience, but triggered by something in human experience (e. g., a beautiful landscape, the smell of a favorite book, the pitter-patter of rain on a roof, the chirping of a bird, or a refrain of some poem or song). Lewis scholarship on this concept has been adequate in respect to the role it played in the progress of Lewis’s spiritual growth and in respect to its significance for his writing, etc. But nowhere have I found a clearer distinction between Joy’s source and its object or goal than in *From Atheism to Christianity*. The warble of a bird may trigger Joy. Lewis himself enjoyed the experience so much that he longed for a repetition of the experience—but then found that experience wanting. Why? Because he confused source with object. Initially, “he thought that he had been looking for the experience of Joy itself instead of the thing to which Joy was pointing, such as the difference between talking about some gourmet dish and actually eating it” (105). “He now realized that his enjoyment of Joy was the footprint of something other than Joy. . . . His experience of this longing, this sense of eternity, was not the Joy itself, but only

its track” (106). The footprint, the track, was that of the God of Christianity. He is “the joy of man’s desiring.”

Lewis’s experience and Dr. Heck’s description of it are prime examples of what is often called in literature “the Hound of Heaven” Gospel pattern, a designation borrowed from a Francis Thompson poem so titled. The designation is, simultaneously, an effective yet all too human way of capturing the truth of the closing verses of Romans, Chapter 8: “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” God is persistent, “dogged,” if you will, in working out our eternal salvation. To borrow another title (from Kazuo Ishiguro) God is determined to “Never Let Us Go.” He will go so far (from a

human point of view) as to “hound” or “harass” us into “the joy of the Lord.” Lewis himself described God’s action in terms of a hunter and his fox hounds closing in on a fox or as a fisherman playing his catch. In his autobiography Lewis wrote, “God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous.” Graham Greene’s *The End of the Affair* and Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* picture God’s loving work in our behalf in almost ruthless terms. Not all of us go through Lewis’s struggle toward Christian faith—or if we do, hardly to the same degree. But some do. Nor are God’s kind and saving actions always like those of “the Hound of Heaven” pattern. But for what it’s worth Lewis’s experience and the description of it by Heck (sic) can comfort us with the likelihood of a similar happy and eternal outcome. Kudos to Joel Heck for writing the book and to CPH for publishing it!

*Francis C. Rossow*

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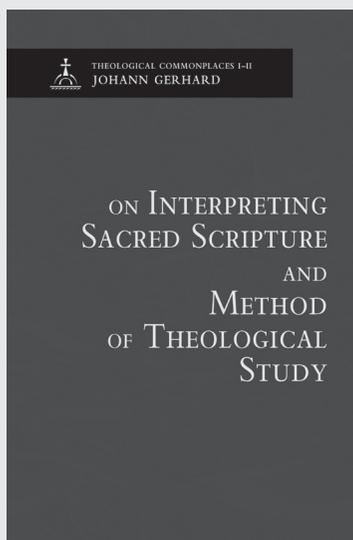
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