

# LUTHERAN SYNOD QUARTERLY

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VOLUME 64 • NUMBER 1  
MARCH 2024

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## **2023 Bjarne Wollan Teigen Reformation Lectures: Lutheran Ethics**

Lutheran Bioethics—Scripture, Grace, and Faith

Lutheran Social Ethics: Two Modes of  
Providence and the Battle for Office

Lutheran Ecoethics

## **Sermons**

Christmas Day, the Nativity of our Lord

Week of the Baptism of Christ

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*The journal of Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary*

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# Contents

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LSQ Vol. 64, No. 1 (March 2024)

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## **2023 BJARNE WOLLAN TEIGEN REFORMATION LECTURES: LUTHERAN ETHICS**

Lutheran Bioethics—Scripture, Grace, and Faith .....	9
<i>Scott Stiegemeier</i>	
Lutheran Social Ethics: Two Modes of Providence and the Battle for Office .....	45
<i>Angus J. L. Menuge</i>	
Lutheran Ecoethics .....	65
<i>Doyle Holbird</i>	

## **SERMONS**

Christmas Day, the Nativity of our Lord.....	87
<i>Steven R. Sparley</i>	
Week of the Baptism of Christ .....	93
<i>Don L. Moldstad</i>	



# Foreword

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*LSQ* Vol. 64, No. 1 (March 2024)

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IN THIS ISSUE OF THE *LSQ*, WE ARE PLEASED TO share with our readers the annual Bjarne Wollan Teigen Reformation Lectures delivered October 26–27, 2023, in Mankato, Minnesota. These lectures are sponsored jointly by Bethany Lutheran College and Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary. This was the fifty-fourth in the series of annual Reformation Lectures. The purpose of these lectures is to increase an interest in and knowledge of the Reformation period.

The theme of this year's lecture series was "Lutheran Ethics." Ethics in general is the application of moral principles to govern behavior, often within a specific area of life. Lutheran Ethics is distinct from general ethics, not only because of its proper understanding God's law, but especially because it is motivated and empowered by the Gospel of Jesus the Christ. This year's lectures look at three areas of our modern lives and apply the theological treasures of the Reformation to them so that we have a right understanding of our relationship to God, each other, and the rest of creation. Without the Reformation theology, it is not possible to view ourselves properly with respect to God and all that He has made. These lectures are grounded in the history of the Reformation and applied to many of the issues with which we are dealing today. The first lecture was presented by Dr. Stiegemeier on the topic of Lutheran Bioethics. The second lecture was on Lutheran Social Ethics and by Dr. Angus Menuge. Lutheran Ecoethics was the topic of the third lecture, and it was presented by Dr. Doyle Holbird.

Here is a little more information about your presenters.

Dr. Scott Stiegemeier teaches theology and bioethics at Concordia University, Irvine, California. Scott is originally from Kansas City, Missouri. He graduated from Concordia University, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1991; Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, MDiv, 1995; Trinity International University, Deerfield, Illinois, MA in bioethics; Loyola University in Chicago, Illinois, D in bioethics. Prior to coming to Concordia University, he served as a pastor in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; the Director of Admissions at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne; and as pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Elmhurst, Illinois. At Concordia, Irvine, Scott teaches bioethics for the nursing program and the Master of Public Health program on a regular basis. His other courses include the History of the Christian Church, Corporate Worship, and Introduction to Theological Thought. Until 2022, he was the director of the pre-seminary and pre-deaconess programs. He is currently the faculty advisor for the pro-life club and frequently speaks on campus for various groups. Scott serves the greater church as well. Most summers, he teaches a pastoral continuing education class for Concordia Theological Seminary. Scott has served on the Commission on Theology and Church Relations for the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod since 2020. He has written several articles and book chapters. His most recent publications include “The Body of Your Sermon: Preaching Incarnational Theology” in *Concordia Pulpit Resources* and “Theological Anthropology for Bioethics” in *Dignitas*. Scott used his recent sabbatical to develop a book which will be a greatly expanded version of the *Dignitas* article.

Dr. Angus J. L. Menuge is chair of the Philosophy Department and co-chair of the Classical Education Program at Concordia University Wisconsin. He was raised in England, and became an American citizen in 2005. He holds a BA (Honors, First Class) in philosophy from Warwick University, the MA and PhD in philosophy from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and the DCA (Diploma in Christian Apologetics) from the International Academy of Apologetics, Evangelism, and Human Rights. Angus has written many peer-reviewed and popular articles on the philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, philosophy of law, apologetics, C. S. Lewis, and the foundation of ethics. He is author of *Agents*

*Under Fire: Materialism and the Rationality of Science* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004) and editor of *C. S. Lewis: Lightbearer in the Shadowlands* (Crossway Books, 1997), *Christ and Culture in Dialogue* (Concordia Publishing House, 1999), *Reading God's World* (Concordia Publishing House, 2004), *Legitimizing Human Rights* (Ashgate 2013, Routledge, 2016), and *Religious Liberty and the Law* (Routledge, 2017). He is co-editor with Jonathan J. Loose and J. P. Moreland of *The Blackwell Companion to Substance Dualism* (Blackwell, 2018) and, with Barry W. Bussey, of *The Inherence of Human Dignity*, volume I and II (Anthem Press, 2021). His forthcoming edited collections focus on the mind and the brain, and rights of conscience. Angus is past president of the Evangelical Philosophical Society (2012–2018).

Dr. Doyle Holbird grew up in Oklahoma. He graduated from Northeastern Oklahoma State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, with a major in biology. A year after graduating he began seminary training at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He received his first call into the ministry to Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1985 where he served as a hospital chaplain for the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, as well as assistant pastor at Grace Lutheran Church. He subsequently served as pastor of congregations in central and southern Illinois.

Also included in this issue are two sermons.

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# Lutheran Bioethics— Scripture, Grace, and Faith

Scott Stiegemeyer  
Concordia University Irvine  
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LSQ Vol. 64, No. 1 (March 2024)

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IN THE EARLY 1890S, FRENCH PAINTER, PAUL Gauguin, left Europe to make his home among the islanders of Tahiti. He painted a work in 1898 showing idyllic native women and girls enjoying the fruits of life on the island. The painting is called, *“Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?”* The subjects in the painting are meant to represent human life during youth, adulthood, and decline. Gauguin’s questions are the most fundamental questions for humanity, questions to which Christianity offers the truest, best, and most beautiful answers.<sup>1</sup> Your beliefs and assumptions about human origins, human nature, and human destiny, in other words, your theological anthropology, will fundamentally shape how you live. It will shape your ethics.

Theological anthropology is one of the pivotal concerns of our time and it is certainly a central guiding principle for Christian bioethics. It is not merely hypothetical or something for academic theologians. Indeed, the question, “What does it mean to be human?” literally stares us in the mirror. Having a distorted view of the human being affects marriage, sex, medicine, family, healthcare, and much more. False anthropologies lead to unnatural, destructive, and anti-human practices, the effects of which we can see all around us. It is in everyone’s interest, therefore, for the church to clarify the biblical teaching about anthropology.

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<sup>1</sup> Glenn T. Stanton, *The Family Project: How God’s Design Reveals His Best for You* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers Inc., 2014), 21.

Christian bioethics is hamstrung without a clear and robust anthropology to inform and guide it. Lutheran doctrine provides that strong foundation for bioethics, one that is oriented by God and His grace. Faithfulness to the will of God flows from His own life-giving benevolence towards us. If the gospel footing of Christian ethics is unsteady or unknown, we will slide into legalism. Understanding humanity in its relation to God is what prevents bioethics from becoming mere external behavioral reform and social activism.<sup>2</sup>

The Lutheran approach to bioethics is well-positioned to proclaim Jesus Christ and manifest Christ's love for our communities in the context of many puzzling and dangerous moral questions. In this discussion of Lutheran Bioethics, there will be three normative *foci*, namely, the three *solas* of the Reformation. First, *Sola Scriptura* because God's revelation tells us the truth about life and death, and all stops in between. Next is *Sola Gratia* because this principle states that everything is gift from Creation to Redemption to Consummation. And finally, there is *Sola Fide* which assures us that the Christian life is free and joyful, under no external compulsion.

Unfortunately, many Christians see bioethical issues as politics, culture wars, or the obsession of the religious right. The answer to this concern is not isolationism. The Church should engage bioethics for the same reasons that a person should love his neighbor. We love each other because we are first the objects of divine love and are being transformed by this love into the kind of people who love others. Loving your neighbor is easier said than done. The great American philosopher, Linus Van Pelt, puts things into perspective in the Peanuts cartoon saying: "I love mankind.... It's people I can't stand!"<sup>3</sup> Anyone can love theoretically. What is transformative is loving someone face-to-face. In Christ, love has a human face. It is impossible to fully grasp the concept of love without coming to terms with Jesus of Nazareth and His ultimate self-giving act. Love has a face, but then sin does too. And when divine love and sin face each other, the result is reconciliation.

Lutheran congregations, as much as any other, are sometimes timid to speak about bioethical issues because it might offend people, drive away potential new members, alienate current ones, draw criticism from outside the church, and veer too far in the direction of engaging in

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<sup>2</sup> See my discussion in: Scott Stiegemeier, "Theological Anthropology for Bioethics," *Dignitas* 30, no. 1 (2023): 13–21.

<sup>3</sup> Linus, November 12, 1959, comic strip of Peanuts, written and drawn by Charles Schulz. <https://www.shmoop.com/quotes/i-love-mankind-its-people-i-cant-stand.html>

civil politics. It does take wisdom to navigate these things, but faithful Christian witness exposes the deeds of darkness (Eph. 5:11) and points to the light. The defense of human life in bioethical contexts honors the Creator and the incarnate Son. It takes seriously the healing miracles of Jesus as signs of the new creation. It affirms the goodness of the earth and the resurrection of the body. And it fulfills our universal calling to love our neighbors as ourselves and be masks of God.<sup>4</sup>

Caring for the physical needs of people has always been part of the identity of the church. Even its historic enemies must acknowledge that. The Roman Emperor Julian, for instance, known as “the Apostate,” tried to replace Christian charitable practices with revived pagan ones. He observed that one difference between Christians and pagans is how Christians take care of others. He wrote: “Why do we not observe that it is their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism [Christianity] ... For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever must beg, and the impious Galileans [Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.”<sup>5</sup> From its earliest days, the Church has worked for the physical and temporal benefit of those God places before them. Paying attention to works of mercy, including bioethics, is never merely an interesting side-venture for the few. As even the enemies of Christianity have noticed, mercy is an identifying feature of the Church.

To confess and work as Christians in bioethics is not just a matter of behavioral reform or presidential elections. It is love for the neighbor. It is the Good Samaritan. It is the Table of Duties.<sup>6</sup> It is the doctrine of vocation.<sup>7</sup> It is God at work through human beings to make, give, care, provide, defend, and protect the world.<sup>8</sup> Lutheran bioethics is never reduced to politics, but neither is it withdrawal from engagement with society. The Lutheran ethic neither supports isolation and quietism nor

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<sup>4</sup> When Martin Luther speaks of the doctrine of vocation, he says that human beings are masks of God, that is to say that God is working through us incognito to bless the world.

<sup>5</sup> Julian the Apostate, *To Arsacius, High priest of Galatia* [362, on his way to Antioch in June?]

<sup>6</sup> See the *Small Catechism* of Martin Luther.

<sup>7</sup> See Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Refer to Martin Luther's explanation of the first article of the Apostles' Creed in the *Small Catechism*.

the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch.<sup>9</sup> But it is a false dilemma to think those are our only options.

Rauschenbusch was an American theologian in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who redefined the message and mission of Christianity. He replaced the Biblical atonement and justification with societal improvement. He saw sin as a systemic issue and was less concerned with helping individuals be saved beyond than with improving the lives of people now.

In reaction to the Social Gospel, Friedrich Pfotenhauer, president of the LCMS from 1911 to 1935, wrote: "The real business of the church is to preach the Gospel. It is not the mission of the church to abolish physical misery or to help men to earthly happiness."<sup>10</sup> Carl Walter Berner later wrote in *Concordia Theological Monthly*: "[Luther's] religious convictions would not allow him to confuse salvation and sociology."<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, as Berner continued, "The Christian has a solemn duty to use every lawful method to bring about a worthy social life for the common good and in harmony with the expressed will of God."<sup>12</sup> While the mission of the church is not to create a golden age utopia in this world, it is every person's divine calling to help and support his neighbor in every physical need.<sup>13</sup>

## Sola Scriptura

The *Sola Scriptura* principle in Lutheran theology conveys reality as it truly is. God's Word cuts through the fog of human illusions and Satanic deceptions. This is our epistemology. How do we know what we know and how do we interpret what we perceive? Holy Scripture is the essential corrective lens through which life is rightly understood.

### Every *Ethos* Implies a *Mythos*

Ethical beliefs do not emerge on their own. As Charles Camosy has said, "There is no view from nowhere."<sup>14</sup> All normative theories have a

<sup>9</sup> Rauschenbusch wrote *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, originally published in 1917.

<sup>10</sup> R.L. Moellering, "Rauschenbusch in Retrospect," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 27, no. 8 (August 1956): 613.

<sup>11</sup> Carl Walter Berner, "The Social Ethic of Martin Luther," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 14, no. 3 (March 1943): 172.

<sup>12</sup> Berner, "Social Ethic," 174.

<sup>13</sup> SC Ten Commandments 10.

<sup>14</sup> "It is time for secular Western bioethics to face facts: our moral discourse did not arise out of nowhere. It has a history, and that history comes directly out of centuries of moral reasoning that was grounded in theological first principles." Charles Camosy,

history. Every behavior has a reason. Another way to say this is indicated in the aphorism: Every *ethos* implies a *mythos*.<sup>15</sup> These words from Aristotle show that one's beliefs and assumptions about reality (*mythos*) influence which attitudes and behaviors you think will be conducive to human flourishing (*ethos*). Myths are foundational beliefs about life which are often taken for granted, are unquestioned, and even treated as unquestionable.

One function myths serve is to define things. This is important because what you determine to be right behavior comes from what you think things are. For instance, if individuals who are Jewish or Black are believed to be sub-human, then treating them as "vermin" or "chattel" is consistent with that belief. However, if you believe the Biblical doctrine that all human beings are God's offspring (Acts 17:29), created in His image and atoned for by the death of Jesus Christ, then you will look at every human being as precious merely on the basis of or his being human. Thus, your underlying assumptions and beliefs (*mythos*) determine what manner of life (*ethos*) you find commendable. You must be able to identify something before you can know how it should be regarded and how it must be treated.

Myths<sup>16</sup> give us definitions, but they also give us directions. Allen Verhey explains that "Myths help us to map our world and our place in it. They serve to orient us, to locate us; they enable us to interpret and to see the significance of the things and events around us."<sup>17</sup> In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, people sometimes, tongue-in-cheek, tell visitors asking for directions, "You can't get there from here." They say this because the city, with its mountains and rivers, was not built on a proper grid and is notoriously difficult for newcomers to navigate. Of course, strictly speaking, under the right conditions, you can get *to* anywhere *from* anywhere. But you do need to know "here" and "there" stand in relation to each other.

In the same way, the Christian account of reality is not merely a dictionary, but also our roadmap. It defines things but orients them as well. Christianity is a dynamic picture of where we are from, what we are, and where we are going. Just as you don't know how to treat a

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"No View from Nowhere: The Challenge of Grounding Dignity Without Theology," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 41, no. 12 (December 2015): 938.

<sup>15</sup> "It was Aristotle's claim that character development (or *ethos*) requires a plot (or *mythos*)."(Aristotle, *Poetics* 1450a15-1450b.4.) Allen Verhey, *Nature and Altering It* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 13.

<sup>16</sup> "Worldview" could be another term for *mythos*, as I am using that term.

<sup>17</sup> Verhey, *Nature and Altering It*, 14.

thing until you know what it is, likewise, you do not know where to go until you know where you currently are and where you are meant to go. In creation, a nature includes a *telos*, that is, a goal or purpose. Finding out what it means to be human answers two questions. First it answers, “What?” or “What is it?” Then it answers, “So what?” that is, “What’s the point?”]

### *The Scientism Myth*

The scientism myth is one of the most dominant guiding narratives in the contemporary Western world. Science, of course, is the reasoned study of creation by means of observation, measurement, and logic. Christianity supports science when it glorifies God and promotes human good. *Scientism*, however, presents problems for Christianity. The scientism myth is an ideology with this three-fold creed:

- Everything that can be known can be explained in materialistic terms.
- Science and technology will solve our problems.
- Science is objective.

When applied to the study of human beings, scientism reduces the human person to nothing more than atoms and energy without intrinsic value. A proponent of this perspective, MIT professor Alan Lightman says that we are nothing but bunches of atoms “like trees and like donuts.”<sup>18</sup> That is his answer to the question of “What?”

Richard Dawkins, the Oxford evolutionary biologist, well-known for his criticism of Christianity answers the question, “So what?” when he says that the universe has “no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless, indifference.”<sup>19</sup> In contrast to Dawkins’ creed of despair, the Lutheran hymn writer, Martin Franzmann, wrote:

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<sup>18</sup> “We are nothing but bones, tissues, gelatinous membranes, neurons, electrical impulses and chemicals... We are a bunch of atoms, like trees, and like donuts.” “Alan Lightman Shares His Worldview?,” The Veritas Forum (video), September 16, 2011. Alan Lightman is an American physicist who has taught at Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

<sup>19</sup> Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 133.

O God, O Lord of heav'n and earth,  
Thy living finger never wrote  
That life should be an aimless mote,  
A deathward drift from futile birth.<sup>20</sup>

Unlike the ultimate hopelessness of scientism, Christianity shows that human beings do have meaning and purpose, which are found in the gracious intentions and promises of God. The Bible presents a brighter vision of what it means to be human, one that replaces “blind, pitiless, indifference” with joy, light, and love.

### *The Darwinian Myth*

Integrated with scientism is the outlook of the works of Charles Darwin. According to Darwinism, human origins can be explained naturalistically, and morality is then explained away. If there is no Creator, there is no transcendent lawgiver and moral codes are merely human inventions. There is no universal good or evil. There are only those actions which promote survival and those which hinder it. Subjectively speaking, there are no moral absolutes; there are only preferences.

Taken to its utilitarian end, the Darwinian narrative makes traditional Christian moral teaching not only baseless, but possibly harmful to the greater good. For example, caring for the chronically ill would be a pointless drain of limited resources. People with negative hereditary traits would be viewed as a drag on evolutionary progress and it would be wrong to permit them to pass on their defects. Nature weeds out the weak, after all, through natural selection. Interfering with that process would be unnatural and therefore questionable.

Darwinism implies human inequality. Since some genes improve the species while others degrade it, it says, the right thing to do would be to promote the advancement of good genes (eugenics). Social progressives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the English-speaking world worked for the improvement of civilization by applying the principle of natural selection to society. Social Darwinists assumed the native inequality between peoples and believed there is a moral obligation to improve the “human breeding stock” for the betterment of the world. To drive evolutionary progress, they held that there needed to be more of the “right” kind of people and fewer of the “wrong” kind.

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<sup>20</sup> Martin H. Franzmann, “O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth,” in *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 834 v1.



The eugenicists complained that Christian morality, along with advances in medicine and hygiene, were responsible for the biological degeneration of our species. By caring for the weak and allowing them to pass down their hereditary shortcomings, Christian charity was seen as damaging the prospects of human advancement. Dr. Charles H. Mayo, one of the founders of the Mayo Clinic, said:

Medicine has succeeded in upsetting the law on which evolution has depended for the progress of living creatures; now the unfit survive.... [W]e must not close our eyes to the evil of protecting and perpetuating the physically and mentally unfit.... We actually encourage impurity of stock, in defiance of nature's effort to maintain it<sup>21</sup> by powerful instincts and by destructive disease... we may be slowly sapping the moral fiber and working untold harm to the nation.<sup>22</sup>

These are disturbing words from such a renowned physician whose name is today associated with the highest standards of medical care.

Herbert Spencer, who is most associated with the term "social Darwinism," could not have been more clear: "...institutions which foster good-for-nothings commit an unquestionable injury because they put a stop to that natural process of elimination by which society continually purifies itself."<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Sir Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin and the one who coined the term *eugenics*, adds: "What Nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly."<sup>24</sup>

Former president, Theodore Roosevelt, like many progressives of his time, was a happy supporter of the Anglo-American eugenics movement. In 1914, he stated:

I wish very much that the wrong people could be prevented entirely from breeding; and when the evil nature of these people is sufficiently flagrant, this should be done. Criminals should be sterilized, and feeble-minded persons forbidden to leave offspring behind them.

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<sup>21</sup> The word "it," refers to purity of human stock.

<sup>22</sup> Charles H. Mayo, *Problems in Medical Education*. Address given at the laying of the cornerstone of the Montgomery Ward Memorial Medical-Dental Building, Northwestern University, June 11, 1926.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Carl Degler, *In Search of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11.

<sup>24</sup> Francis Galton, "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope and Aims," *American Journal of Sociology* 10, no. 1 (July 1904).

But as yet there is no way possible to devise which could prevent all undesirable people from breeding. The emphasis should be laid on getting desirable people to breed.<sup>25</sup>

He also wrote in a letter the year before: “Someday we will realize that the prime duty, the inescapable duty of the good citizen of the right type is to leave his or her blood behind him in the world and that we have no business to permit the perpetuation of citizens of the wrong type.”<sup>26</sup> Decades before the well-known atrocities of the Second World War, the philosophical underpinnings of racial hygiene were openly favored in the United States.

These examples demonstrate that how we answer “What?” is important for “So what?” Every *ethos* implies a *mythos*. If the myths of scientism and/or Darwinism truly represent the way things are, human beings who are on the margins of the accepted parameters of utility may find themselves in danger.

### *Goethe and Jane Austen*

A normative myth assumes a meta-narrative of some kind or at least a catena of unquestioned presuppositions. But sometimes the only thing that directs a person is one’s own subjective experience. Instead of a coherent worldview, in that case, intuition and sentiment are relied upon to guide one’s choices. Two great novels can be used to illustrate the interplay of head (objectivity) and heart (subjectivity) in how we govern our lives.

First, in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the eponymous protagonist is a young poet who falls in love with Charlotte, a beautiful and intelligent woman who, unfortunately for Werther, is already engaged to be married. Others beseech him to be practical, to find employment, and settle down with a woman who is available to him. To him, this would be to become bourgeois. Werther, the true romantic, is unwilling to do anything except pursue the impulses of his heart. Charlotte remains faithful to her previous promises, however, and overcome by his broken heart, Werther takes his own life. The novel was one of the most popular books of its time. Young Werther was looked upon as heroic to place his passion above what the world considers common sense. This is Romantic in the philosophical

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<sup>25</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “Twisted Eugenics,” *The Outlook* 106 (1914): 30–4.

<sup>26</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to Charles B. Davenport, January 3, 1913. [diglib.amphilsoc.org/islandora/object/letter-theodore-roosevelt-charles-b-davenport](http://diglib.amphilsoc.org/islandora/object/letter-theodore-roosevelt-charles-b-davenport).

sense. Romanticism is the set of intellectual and artistic movements which privilege internal experience over external propositions.

One great cultural antidote to Goethe's Romanticism is found in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) by Jane Austen.<sup>27</sup> In her context, the word "sense" was a reference to good judgment and social propriety while "sensibility" referred to the passions. The novel follows the love affairs of two sisters, Elinor, who is mature and restrained, embodying good sense, and Marianne, who believes in trusting her feelings in spite of reasoned counsel. In one place, Marianne even chides her clear-headed sister for her emotional restraint, "Always prudence, honor, and duty. Elinor, where is your heart?"

Both sisters are seeking true love. Elinor uses her sense to avoid a scandalous affair. She is initially frustrated and lonely until circumstances reverse unexpectedly to pave the way for marital bliss. Marianne throws sense to the wind and indulges in an exciting amorous adventure, blinded to the duplicity of her lover until it is too late, and she is dumped and devastated. In the end, Marianne, like her sister, finds true love right in front of her eyes based on commitment and character instead of unbridled feelings. The lesson is clear. Emotions are good, but the heart must remain accountable to the head when making substantive choices.

These two great cultural artifacts illustrate the tone and approach of the world in which we presently live. The American Church, like American society generally, is more Goethe than Austen. Sentimentality, feeling, and inner light are given equal or more weight than normative doctrines. When it comes to challenging ethical dilemmas in healthcare, those who "go with their gut," even when that runs counter to their professed religious beliefs (or the dictates of the civil law) prioritize emotion and desire over any sort of objective principles.

### *Word and Image: Importance for Ethics*

The tension between head and heart is amplified by the changes which technology bring not only to our culture but to our very biology. This is being observed with the hegemony of screen technology and the decline of reading, the battle between the image and the word. The *Sola Scriptura* principle impresses the importance of the Word of God in Christian faith and life.

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<sup>27</sup> The idea for using Austen in this manner is from Ken Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians & Popular Culture*, Turning Point Christian Worldview Series (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1989).

God is talkative and Lutheranism is wordy. It is by His Word that God creates the universe and it is His Word that “bespeaks us righteous.”<sup>28</sup>

God is a speaker. Of course, God is also an iconographer. God’s work can be seen as well as heard but verbal communication, so essential for faith, is being subverted by contemporary culture and technology. Confessional Lutherans remain Logo-centric, but our world is becoming ever so much less so. Satan hates words. He certainly hates *the* Word. He still uses language to deceive us, but the evidence suggests that he hates it. This is why he works so hard to deconstruct language to confuse, obfuscate, and make verbal communication impossible. We are designed in such a way that not only do we communicate verbally, but we generally think verbally as well. Indeed, we think in images also but to communicate rationally with other people, words are necessary.

Observers point out that our culture is shifting away from verbal communication toward greater reliance upon visuals and moving images.<sup>29</sup> Even at times when we still use words, the sequences are simpler and shorter making it difficult to develop complex ideas. Clear writing and clear thinking go hand in glove. When we communicate increasingly in memes, bullet points, or social media posts, we do not communicate with nuance or depth. Our information processing skills then, with disuse, become shallower. This is why Nicholas Carr wrote the article, “Is Google Making Us Stupid”<sup>30</sup> and the corresponding book, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*.<sup>31</sup> His thesis is that when we stop reading or speaking in long-form prose, linear, propositional, and rational thinking gets cloudier. Even as early as 1964, media philosopher, Marshall McLuhan, echoed the same sentiment when he prophesied the “dissolution of the linear mind.”<sup>32</sup>

Carr cites research showing that our brains are far more malleable than previously imagined. The principles of neuroplasticity suggest that

<sup>28</sup> Martin Franzmann, “Thy Strong Word” in *Lutheran Service Book*, 578 v3.

<sup>29</sup> Arthur W. Hunt III, *The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013); Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 2008. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>.

<sup>31</sup> Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (London: Atlantic Books, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 1.

brains change according to the types of thinking we do.<sup>33</sup> The brain is comparable to a muscle in that way. Just as particular muscles atrophy if they go unused, so also connections in the brain grow weaker if left unengaged.<sup>34</sup> Neurons that fire together, wire together. The kind of neuronal activity that occurs when we read texts or listen to sermons, carry on rich conversations, or engage in reasoned debates is very different from when we spend hours superficially skimming websites, constantly distracted by alerts and notifications on our phones, and chasing distractions down the hyperlink rabbit holes.

In *Endangered Minds*, Jane M. Healy argues that we are rearing a generation of “different brains.”<sup>35</sup> We succeed, she says, in teaching children to literally and phonetically interpret the symbols on the page, but they lack the ability to grapple with meaning and verbal reasoning. According to researchers, screen culture is chipping away at our “capacity for concentration and contemplation.”<sup>36</sup> Jordan Grafman, head of the cognitive neuroscience unit at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, explains that the “constant shifting of our attention when we’re online may make our brains more nimble when it comes to multitasking, but improving our ability to multitask actually hampers our ability to think deeply and creatively.”<sup>37</sup>

UCLA developmental psychologist, Patricia Greenfield, writing for *Science* in 2009 on the impact of media on learning concluded that: “We can, for example, rotate objects in our minds better than we used to be able to. But our ‘new strengths in visual-spatial intelligence’ go hand in hand with a weakening of our capacities for the kind of ‘deep processing’ that underpins ‘mindful knowledge acquisition, inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination, and reflection.’”<sup>38</sup> Maggie Jackson adds, “Studies show that many U.S. high school students can’t synthesize or assess information, express complex thoughts, or analyze arguments.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Kep Kee Loh and Ryota Kanai, “How Has the Internet Reshaped Human Cognition,” *The Neuroscientist* 22, no. 5 (2016): 506.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Korte, “The Impact of the Digital Revolution on Human Brain and Behavior: Where Do We Stand?,” *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 22, no. 2 (2020): 106.

<sup>35</sup> Jane Healy, *Endangered Minds: Why Children Don’t Think and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 45.

<sup>36</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 140.

<sup>38</sup> Patricia Greenfield, “Technology and Informal Education: What Is Taught, What Is Learned,” *Science* 323 (February 2009): 71.

<sup>39</sup> Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2009), 18.

Visual images are excellent for evoking an emotional response, but without exposition, we cannot know fully what they mean. Take for example, a painting of the crucifixion of Jesus. Without any explanation of what one is seeing, the viewer will be left with only an emotional response. They might be led to feel sorry for the poor man on the cross or to become angry with his tormentors.<sup>40</sup> But we know that neither of those responses are germane to the event in the picture. Language is indispensable for proclamation and understanding.

These claims have many obvious implications for the mission and ministry of the Church. How well can people understand sermons, for example, if their ability to follow verbal communication is disabled? But does it really matter for Lutheran bioethics if people become less verbally expressive? Indeed, it does. When people cannot adequately put their thoughts into words, misunderstandings are more likely to occur. With less facility with words, nuance is lost. We look for simple solutions to complex problems. The decline of the ability to think clearly and articulate one's impressions to others contributes to a culture of rage. It is frustrating when people cannot follow you even as you make your best effort to communicate. Persuading others requires skill with verbal communication; otherwise, we shout louder to intimidate and bully. Cancel culture bears this out.

To whatever degree our rational minds are being hobbled by screen technologies, moral discourse is endangered. Careful analysis of complicated matters, such as gene-editing and when to remove life support, are challenging in the best of circumstances. But in an environment of constant cognitive overload induced by our digital habits, mindful judgment is badly impaired. Attention is fragmented and judgment is corroded.

The lucid mind is not only a factor for logic but also for relationships. Ethical conversations, especially in a healthcare context, require empathy but the evidence suggests that the digital revolution is even crashing cognitive empathy.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Two of the incorrect ways of thinking about the crucifixion of our Lord according to Martin Luther in his treatise on meditating upon Christ's passion. Martin Luther, *How to Meditate on the Passion of Christ* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004).

<sup>41</sup> As referenced in Korte: L. Carrier et al., "Virtual Empathy: Positive and Negative Impacts of Going Online Upon Empathy in Young Adults," *Computers in Human Behavior* 52 (2015): 39–48; C. James et al., "Digital Life and Youth Well-Being, Social Connectedness, Empathy, and Narcissism," *Pediatrics* 140 (2017): 71–75.

The Romantic movement deprecates logic and screen technology short-circuits our rational brains. In tandem, they create the perfect storm to destabilize ethical decision-making.

### *Moral Relativism*

Since having “different brains”<sup>42</sup> makes thinking with complexity more difficult, intuitive feeling, or “sensitivity” as Jane Austen would have it, takes on an ever-greater role in determining our values and behaviors. Objectivity and the ability to know the truth is questioned. Moral relativism begins with the assumption that there is no possibility of an unbiased point of view. It says that truth is always perspectival.<sup>43</sup> And while perspective should not be discounted, neither should it have the final say. Pope Benedict XVI, before he became the pope, gave a keen analysis with his phrase “the dictatorship of relativism.” He said in a sermon:

Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be “tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14), seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> See Jane Healey above.

<sup>43</sup> Herodotus tells a story about Darius, King of the Persians, showing that people have long been disconcerted by the fact of moral difference: “Darius, after he had got the kingdom, called into his presence certain Greeks who were at hand, and asked – ‘What he should pay them to eat the bodies of their fathers when they died?’ To which they answered that there was no sum that would tempt them to do such a thing. He then sent for certain Indians, of the race called Callatians, men who eat their fathers, and asked them, while the Greeks stood by, and knew by the help of an interpreter all that was said – ‘What he should give them to burn the bodies of their fathers at their decease?’ The Indians exclaimed aloud and bade him forbear such language. Such is men’s wont herein; and Pindar was right, in my judgment, when he said, ‘Law is the king o’er all.’” Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. George Rawlinson (Moscow: Roman Roads Media, 2013), 193.

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Homily of His Eminence Card. Joseph Ratzinger*, Vatican Basilica, April 18, 2005. [https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice\\_20050418\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html)

He continues, “We, however, have a different goal: the Son of God, the true man. He is the measure of true humanism. An ‘adult’ faith is not a faith that follows the trends of fashion and the latest novelty; a mature adult faith is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ. It is this friendship that opens us up to all that is good and gives us a criterion by which to distinguish the true from the false, and deceit from truth...”



In moral subjectivism, the individual's feelings and will are the ultimate governing principles.

### *David Hume's Subjectivism*

"Follow your heart" is a common chorus in our time, but it is often very bad advice. Heart is usually taken to mean that non-rational aspect of human experience. It is the realm of feeling, sensation, intuition, and dream. The philosophical and artistic movements known as Romanticism emerged as a corrective to the sterility of Rationalism. The Church can sympathize to a degree. After all, human beings are not simply organic computational devices. We are living, thinking, feeling, godlike creatures without parallel in all the universe. It is good to correct a problem (rationalism), as long as you do not over-correct. We must not swerve from the ditch of rationalism only to fall into the pit of sentimentalism on the other side of the road.

In the eighteenth century, the English philosopher, David Hume (1711–76), prioritized sensation over reason. Hume's ethical theory has been called "sentimentalism" because he believed that moral opinions arise from human sentiments (feelings) and really nothing more.<sup>45</sup> In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, he argues that there is nothing objectively good or evil. He says,

[W]hen you pronounce any action or character to be vicious [vice], you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. . . . Nothing can be more real, or concern us more, than our own sentiments of pleasure and uneasiness; and if these be favourable to virtue, and unfavourable to vice, no more can be requisite to the regulation of our conduct and behaviour.<sup>46</sup>

For Hume, evil is the word you use to explain a feeling of disapproval or dislike within you. When ethics is rooted in sentiment, desire, and will instead of objective reality, especially when pervasive technology is disabling our very ability to think clearly, people suffer. This was also observed by American humorist, Mark Twain, who wrote an essay, published posthumously in 1923, called *Corn Pone Opinions*.<sup>47</sup> Twain's

<sup>45</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740), bk. 3, pt. 1, sec. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, bk. 3, pt. 1, sec. 1.

<sup>47</sup> Mark Twain, *Corn Pone Opinions*, ed. Albert Bigelow Paine, (1923).



most important observation is that “We all do no end of feeling, and we mistake it for thinking.”

## Sola Gratia: Creation and Justification

The Reformation principle of Grace Alone in bioethics means that our understanding of human life can be summarized with the one word: “gift.” Martin Luther’s explanation of the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, is built on the principle that God is the One who gives and we are the ones who receive<sup>48</sup> We are what we are by the grace of God. Two key concepts for understanding ourselves, worked out in the early ecumenical councils of the church in order express the biblical doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, are nature and person. They are important for Christian anthropology as well.

### *Nature and Person*

#### *What a Nature Is*

Theology relies upon definitions and distinctions. We are back to the question of “what?” in order to lead to “so what?” In theological anthropology, human beings must be defined and distinguished from other beings to determine correct action in medicine and healthcare. It is the principle, once again, that you must know what a thing is before you know how it should be regarded and how it must be treated. So, to know what it *means* to be human, we must establish what a human being *is*. This brings us first to the question of human nature. In his book, *Nature and Altering It*, Allen Verheys identifies at least sixteen definitions of the word “nature.” The first sense he lists comes from the ancient Greeks, who understood nature to mean “the kind of thing a thing is.”<sup>49</sup> What kind of thing, then, is a human being? When we speak of human nature, we are referring to innate and immutable qualities that constitute humanity and are present in every individual human whether it may be seen or expressed at any given time or not. For example, humans are, by nature, rational beings regardless of an any individual’s relative ability to exercise that capacity. We will go even one step further to say that, for all created things, the nature of a thing includes a *telos*, a purpose, or a meaning. If you know what something’s essence or nature is, then you can discern what it is for and how you may treat it. The “What?” naturally leads to the “So what?”

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<sup>48</sup> SC Creed 2.

<sup>49</sup> Verhey, *Nature and Altering It*, 2.

*Sartre: Essence and Existence*

Existentialist philosophy has been deeply influential in contemporary thought. The concept of nature is characteristically jettisoned in existentialism which says that nothing defines us but what we make of ourselves. The commonly repeated axiom is that *existence precedes essence*, with essence being another word for nature.<sup>50</sup> Existentialism says that we exist and then we create our own meaning and determine our own futures. There is nothing outside ourselves that tells us what our lives mean. This is a reversal of the traditional view that essence precedes the existence of any individual thing. This is the *mythos* which implies an existentialist *ethos*.

To describe the traditional view of nature/essence, the French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre uses the example of a paper-knife. If there is a paper-knife on a desk, that is because someone, an artisan, previously thought of a paper-knife and then designed and manufactured one according to a prior intention and design. The paper-knife, then, began as the conception of the artisan who endowed it with a definite significance. Sartre explains this by saying, "We cannot suppose that a man would produce a paper-knife without knowing what purpose it would serve."<sup>51</sup> This conception in the mind of the artisan is real before the particular paper-knife itself exists. In this example, Sartre explains the long-established assumption that essence precedes existence.

By contrast, Sartre says that man is completely responsible for his own identity. He wills and chooses for himself. "Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive of it."<sup>52</sup> With no God to give man meaning, the responsibility to determine and interpret himself is man's own. The anti-essentialism of Sartre has been profoundly influential to the present, most especially apparent in modern feminist ideologies and transgender theories.

Christian theology holds that there indeed is such a thing as human nature, written and endowed by God, which is shared by every particular human that comes into being. To be clear, "human nature" does not refer to free-floating Platonic forms, but simply to a character shared by all people which determines whether one is, or is not, human. Humans are those individuals fashioned by the Creator's loving intentions in His

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<sup>50</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 20.

<sup>51</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism*, 21.

<sup>52</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism*, 22.

own image and named by Him,<sup>53</sup> who are redeemed and restored by the incarnation of His Son<sup>54</sup>, and which subsist in individual men and women.<sup>55</sup>

If no God means no transcendent morality, then ethical decisions, whatever else they may entail, boil down to feeling and trusting one's instincts, according to Sartre.<sup>56</sup> And in the end, man must choose what to do. He is condemned to be free to make choices for himself. There is no transcendent power for him to rely upon. This is experienced as a tremendous burden.

### *What a Person Is*

Human nature and human personhood go together. Just as nature helps us to discern which classification of entities possesses membership in the human community, the term "person" helps us to identify which members of that community should be respected and require moral obligations from the rest of us. Think of issues such as abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, and euthanasia. Which human lives—or persons—deserve respect and protection? Are there some human beings,

<sup>53</sup> Adam named the animals, but God gave Adam his name.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Chemnitz relates the incarnation of God's Son to the re-creation of our human nature: "Although our wretched human nature because of sin has been torn away and alienated from God, who is life itself (Eph. 4:8; Is. 49:8 ff.), yet His physical body, which is of the same substance with us, is most intimately joined and united with the divine nature in the person of the Son of God because of the hypostatic (personal) union, that in this way the restitution and reparation of it [our human nature] becomes surer and more certain, and thus we in turn are made participants (*κοινωνοι*) of the divine nature in Christ (2 Peter 1:4), and thus also receive fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost (1 John 1:3)." Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 40; This is also reflected in the First Sunday after Christmas prayer: "O God, our Maker and Redeemer, You wonderfully created us and in the incarnation of Your Son yet more wondrously restored our human nature. Grant that we may ever be alive in Him who made Himself to be like us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen." *Lutheran Service Book: Propers for the Day* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 279.

<sup>55</sup> Existentialist anti-essentialism has also been profoundly important for modern feminist ideologies and transgender theories as well. Simone de Beauvoir gave second wave feminism its central thesis in her book *The Second Sex* (1949). She was also, incidentally, the longtime companion and lover of Jean-Paul Sartre. She writes: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 283. She also wrote: "Nature does not define woman: it is she who defines herself by reclaiming nature for herself in her affectivity." de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 49.

<sup>56</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism*, 32

for instance, which are not persons? And alternatively, should some non-humans, such as gorillas, be considered persons? How intimately we bind human nature to personhood has manifold ethical implications.

The concept of person, as it is used today, is a product of Christian theology.<sup>57</sup> More specifically, it arose from two central questions of the faith, namely, “What is God?” and “What is Christ?” To address these fundamental questions, the ancient fathers made use of the idea of *prosopon*, or *persona*. The origin of *prosopon* comes from Greek theater. It denotes the roles of individual characters expressed through the wearing of masks.<sup>58</sup> In Greek theater, a character is known by speaking and by the *prosopon* he wears. The God of the Bible is a God who speaks. In Scripture, God conducts personal dialogue in himself, one *prosopon* to another.<sup>59</sup> Joseph Ratzinger wrote that “The idea of person expresses in its origin the idea of dialogue and the idea of God as a dialogical being.”<sup>60</sup> Dialogue requires one who speaks and one who is addressed. Therefore, humans are persons, which is to say they are by nature creatures in dialogue with God and each other.<sup>61</sup>

While it is common in ordinary usage to treat the words “person” and “human being” as synonyms, that is not necessarily the case in certain contexts. In traditional Christian thought, there are no human beings who are not persons. But the U.S. law, on the other hand, does not recognize a person and a human as the self-same thing. Non-human entities like corporations are legal persons, for example, while for a long time in American history, enslaved humans did not qualify as full persons. It is comparatively easy to define a “human being” in science. It is a biological designation for members of the species *homo sapiens*. However, the term “person,” as it appears in some literature, only refers to an entity with rights and obligations, whether human or not. Thus, a dispute emerges in bioethics over whether we owe respect to others because they are persons, or simply because they are human beings, were one to assume that the two things are not synonymous. No one can scientifically question that abortion ends a human life. A living member

<sup>57</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, “Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology,” *Communio* 17 (Fall 1990): 439.

<sup>58</sup> Ratzinger, “Notion of Person,” 441.

<sup>59</sup> “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness,’” Gen. 1:26 EHV; “The Lord God said, ‘Look, the man has become like one of us.’” Gen. 3:22, EHV; “The Lord says to my Lord.” Ps. 110:1, ESV.

<sup>60</sup> Ratzinger, “Notion of Person,” 443.

<sup>61</sup> This applies even to embryos, people with profound brain injuries, and those in comas, etc., because though they are unable to actualize interpersonal dialogue, they are the kind of beings (human nature) who do.

of the species *homo sapiens* is killed.<sup>62</sup> The question is whether an embryo or fetus possesses the right to life on the mere basis of it being human or whether some additional qualifications determining personhood are also required. Those who disagree with the claim that the embryo or fetus is a person, do so because he or she fails to meet what they consider necessary criteria for such a status.

The commonly suggested touchstones for being a person are:

- Rationality
- Sentience, the ability to experience sensations, such as pain<sup>63</sup>
- Self-consciousness (self-awareness)
- Use of language
- Moral agency

No matter what is included on the list, no consensus about the implications of these characteristics can be reached. Identifying personhood with any specific constellation of characteristics is problematic because, invariably, exceptions will occur. One individual may appear not to possess the characteristic in question, or others may possess them to a greater or lesser extent. If any of the criteria for personhood come in gradations, then that implies that that an individual's moral status comes in gradations as well. The simplest and clearest argument is that we owe neighborly regard and treatment to other human beings for no other reason than that they share our humanity and without regard to any comparative traits. From a Christian standpoint, there are no degrees of personhood. Every human being, without exception and at every stage of development, is a person in the fullest sense and therefore is owed the consideration which Jesus Christ requires us to show to our neighbor. One is a person if one is objectively and genealogically a member of the human family.

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<sup>62</sup> Widely used embryology textbooks refer to the embryo as a human individual: "Human development begins at fertilization when a sperm fuses with an oocyte to form a single cell, the zygote. This highly specialized, totipotent cell, (capable of giving rise to any cell type) marks the beginning of each of us as a unique individual." Keith L. Moore, *The Developing Human: Clinically Oriented Embryology*, eleventh ed. (Edinburgh: Elsevier, 2020), 11.

<sup>63</sup> Here one asks, "Is an embryo/fetus a person if it cannot feel pain? Is the capacity to feel pain necessary for personhood?" For certainly, the violence of abortion is painful, assuming one can feel pain.

## IMAGO AND JUSTIFICATION IN BIOETHICS

*The Image of God*

From the earliest days of Christian history, theologians have relied heavily upon the biblical teaching that humans are made in the “image and likeness of God” to help us understand what we are and how we shall live. As seen above, certain traits are commonly identified as essential to defining personhood. A similar list is typically given to identify the meaning of the image of God. In fact, it is often the very same list. Human rationality especially, receives priority. Long before Christianity, the Greeks cited the importance of rationality for defining a human being. Aristotle, for instance, says that man is a rational animal.<sup>64</sup> He means that humans, as humans, are “endowed with certain cognitive powers, namely intellect and reason.”<sup>65</sup>

Christian thinkers have taken up this baton. To define a person, Boethius, in the sixth century, said that a person is an individual substance of a rational nature.<sup>66</sup> Thomas Aquinas correlated rationality with the image of God. “Man’s excellence,” he explained, “consists in the fact that God made him in His own image by giving him an intellectual soul which raises him above the beasts of the field.”<sup>67</sup> Despite the idea’s impressive heritage, there is no Biblical requirement that the image of God should be equated with man’s rational soul.<sup>68</sup> In fact, capacities such as intellect and volition cannot define the *imago Dei*, Luther said, for otherwise the devil too is in the image of God, as he has the same or greater mental capacities as we do.<sup>69</sup>

While observing that many traditional definitions of the image are inadequate, Lutheran dogmaticians generally equate it with the righteousness and perfect faith which humans no longer possess, though some confessional theologians do concede that a wider definition of

<sup>64</sup> Aristotle and Roger Crisp, *Nicomachean Ethics*, rev. ed., Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014) I:13.

<sup>65</sup> Anselm Oelze, *Animal Rationality: Later Medieval Theories, 1250-1350*, Investigating Medieval Philosophy 12 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2018), 1.

<sup>66</sup> Boethius, “A Treatise Against Eutyches and Nestorius,” in *The Theological Tractates* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2000), 27. This definition is frequently quoted by medieval authors such as Thomas Aquinas.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.93.2.

<sup>68</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Brown (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Publishing House, 1955–), 1:61. Hereafter *LW*.

<sup>69</sup> *LW* 1:61.

image may be allowed.<sup>70</sup> The Book of Concord is clear indeed that our original righteousness was lost entirely when Adam sinned<sup>71</sup> which would mean, by standard Lutheran estimation, that the image of God was also lost in us and is only restored in Christ. Under this understanding of the *imago*, it becomes an unsteady Biblical basis for Christian ethics. For if the image is not borne by every human being without exception, believer or non, then it cannot be a sufficient reason for requiring the protection of every human life. The implications for bioethics are clear. The salient question is whether, in Lutheran doctrine, the *imago Dei* can be cited as a basis for ethics in any sense.

Many theologians through history have, in fact, placed tremendous ethical weight on our possessing the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). Book VI of *The Divine Institutes* by Lactantius in the third century is one example. He presented a two-fold idea for why right treatment is owed to others. On the one hand, we all share a common humanity. That itself means something ethically. We share the same human nature. And on the other hand, all humans are created in God's image.<sup>72</sup>

Also, the three Great Cappadocian fathers of the fourth century, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus, all wrote about the moral implications of the *imago Dei* for addressing issues such as poverty, slavery, sexual violation, and ministering to the sick. According to Kyle Harper, no one in history is on record before Gregory of Nyssa condemning slavery as an institution on the mere

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<sup>70</sup> Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 222, 227, 238.

<sup>71</sup> FC SD I, 10-11.

<sup>72</sup> "[A]lthough this very thing which you shall give to man is given to God, for man is the image of God. ... For if we all derive our origin from one man, whom God created, we are plainly of one blood; and therefore it must be considered the greatest wickedness to hate a man, even though guilty.... Likewise, if we are all inspired and animated by one God, what else are we than brothers?... On account of this relationship of brotherhood, God teaches us never to do evil, but always good. ... [B]ut one man was formed by God, and from that one man all the earth was filled with people, in the same way as again took place after the deluge, which they certainly cannot deny.... Therefore humanity is to be preserved, if we wish rightly to be called men. But what else is this preservation of humanity than the loving a man because he is a man, and the same as ourselves?... Therefore, if it is contrary to nature to injure a man, it must be in accordance with nature to benefit a man; and he who does not do this deprives himself of the title of a man, because it is the duty of humanity to succour the necessity and peril of a man." Lactantius, "The Divine Institutes, VI, 10-1," in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, trans. William Fletcher (Buffalo: Christian Literature Company, 1886) 7:172-5.



basis that human beings are in the *imago Dei*.<sup>73</sup> This was extraordinary because, in the Greco-Roman world, slavery was a nearly universal and unquestioned practice. Aristotle even wrote that some people were born to be slaves.<sup>74</sup> But Gregory of Nyssa asked, “who can put a price on the image of God?”<sup>75</sup>

Concerning something more directly related to healthcare, the oration by Gregory of Nazianzus, *On the Love of the Poor*, is rhetorically unmatched in its exhortation to Christians to serve the sick and suffering. For us to be truly human, he wrote, we must recognize the humanity of all the poor and pitiable and especially those afflicted with what he called the “sacred disease” (i.e., leprosy).<sup>76</sup>

The importance of our created nature for our duties to others continues through the centuries to include the Reformation era and the contemporary church. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin wrote that we must show all honor and love to everyone because the divine image exists in all.<sup>77</sup> In 1992, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* links image with human dignity: “The dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God.”<sup>78</sup>

Though Martin Luther generally thought of the image as the original righteousness of Adam and Eve which was totally lost in the Fall, that is not the only sense image had in his mind. Oswald Bayer explains in his article in the *Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity*, “Martin Luther’s notion of human dignity is, in line with the entire Christian tradition, identical to the notion of humankind as the image of God (Gen. 1.26f).”<sup>79</sup> Image and dignity are equated. People possess intrinsic dignity, accordingly, because they are still bearers of the image. Likewise, John Gerhard acknowledged that there can be a wider sense of the

<sup>73</sup> Kyle Harper, “Christianity and the Roots of Human Dignity in Late Antiquity,” in *Christianity and Freedom I: Historical Perspectives*, ed. T. Shah and A. Hertzke (Cambridge, 2016), 132.

<sup>74</sup> *Politics* I.5, 1254a18.

<sup>75</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, quoted in David Bentley Hart, “The ‘Whole Humanity’: Gregory of Nyssa’s Critique of Slavery in Light of His Eschatology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 1 (2001): 53.

<sup>76</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, “Oration 14, On the Love of the Poor” in Brian E. Daley, ed. *Gregory of Nazianzus: The Early Church Fathers* (London: Routledge, 2006), 78.

<sup>77</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.VII.6.

<sup>78</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), Part 3, Section 1, Chapter 1, 1700.

<sup>79</sup> Oswald Bayer, “Martin Luther’s Conception of Human Dignity,” in Marcus Dowell, Jens Braarvig, Roger Brownsword and Dietmare Mieth, eds., *Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity* (Cambridge: University Printing House, 2014), 101.



disputed term which is not limited to the lost original righteousness: "If the divine image is taken for inborn elements in us which are tenuous remnants of the divine image in the mind and will of man. . . then we again confess that the image of God has not been lost completely with respect to these tiny particles, because the work of the Law is still written even in the hearts of the unregenerate."<sup>80</sup>

However, if, as many Lutheran theologians say, the image is lost by all, only to be restored in some, then a different argument for the inviolability of human life is needed. Here Lutherans can propose the doctrine of objective justification. Every human creature has been atoned for by the death of Jesus Christ and the world is justified in Him. That, in addition to our creational nature, is why human beings are special. Since the Reformed Confessions deny the unlimited scope of the atonement and general justification,<sup>81</sup> the *imago* remains for them their best starting point for bioethics.

### *Imago or Justification*

In 1984, Jeffrey Gibbs wrote an article entitled "The Grace of God as the Foundation for Ethics." In it, he voiced his concern that the *imago Dei* is a faulty basis for ethics. He argues that that view will ultimately undermine justification through faith alone.<sup>82</sup> There is a domino effect, he argues. Basing ethics on the *imago Dei* indicates that there is still some good quality within us deserving of respect even after Adam sinned. So, if we continue to possess some aspect of the divine image after the fall, then the scope and gravity of the fall must not be as great as has been said. In Gibbs's words: "To emphasize that fallen mankind is still the possessor of an undefined, vague 'image of God' is tantamount to saying, 'there is something nice about fallen mankind.'"<sup>83</sup> His point is that basing ethics on our possession of the *imago Dei* diminishes the gravity of original sin, which, if true, would reverse the most important gain of the Reformation. Justification would no longer be seen as

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<sup>80</sup> John Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces*, 11.9.129 (8-11:322), quoted in Klaus Detlev Schulz, *Theological Anthropology and Sin*, ed. Gifford A. Grobein, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics (Fort Wayne: Luther Academy, 2023), 74.

<sup>81</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith 3.6, in Chad Van Dixhoorn, ed., *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 190; Canons of Dort, 2.8, in Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms*, 151.

<sup>82</sup> Jeffrey Gibbs, "The Grace of God as the Foundation for Ethics," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 48, no. 2-3 (April-July 1984).

<sup>83</sup> Gibbs, "Grace of God," 188.

coming by grace alone through faith alone, but by grace and faith joined with the “nice” elements still present in us from Eden.

This argument is not entirely convincing. Confessional Lutheran doctrine certainly does reject any implication that something lies within us which moves God to save us. Yet that does not necessarily invalidate the claim that you retain a continuing God-given character which I ought to respect. A natural blessedness or inviolability, which is tied to the image in Genesis 9:6, can still be recognized in humanity post-fall that has nothing at all to do with justification before God (*coram Deo*).<sup>84</sup> To say that sinners retain creational excellence before other people (*coram hominibus*) does not mean that sinners contribute something meritorious to their salvation. The one thing does not necessarily follow the other.

We have indeed entirely lost our pure standing with God and have completely alienated ourselves from Him, but the incalculable worth of our humanity is not obliterated by the fall. Saying that you continue to have inherent importance which should be recognized and respected by your fellow human beings does not mean that you have a self-contributed righteousness that avails before God or that you are not in total bondage to sin. Works-righteousness is never at play in this because any special honor is itself a total gift from the God who created you. And it does not contribute towards God’s acceptance of us. The fall does not turn us into inherently evil things. Nature, by definition, is something God makes. Everything God makes is good. By sin we become enemies of God, but sin is always an accident to human nature, and never destroys our essence.<sup>85</sup> Human nature is corrupted by the fall,

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<sup>84</sup> “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” Gen. 9:6, ESV; I cannot kill a man because of image. To those who say the image is lost, it nevertheless remains the reason given for the murder prohibition. Whether one has the image or merely *had* the image, either way, it is still the reason one cannot murder another. So ethically speaking, *have* or *had* is a distinction without a difference. What makes your life inviolable as opposed to a blade of grass or a cow is that you, in Adam, were made in the image of God. This creational argument applies to all people whether believers or not, both those who are restored in Christ by faith and those who are not. The debate over the meaning of the *imago Dei* and whether it retained in some sense after the fall is unimportant ethically. God’s reason for prohibiting murder in Genesis 9 makes no differentiation. The Old Testament scholar, John Kleinig, writes, “In Genesis 9:6, the reason for the capital punishment of a murderer is God’s creation of the victim in his image. The violation of a human body is an attack on God.” John Kleinig, “In His Image,” *Logia* 23, no. 3 (Holy Trinity 2019): 55. To wrong the dignity of a human being is not just a moral failing; it is blasphemous.

<sup>85</sup> FC SD I.

fatally so, but it is not annihilated.<sup>86</sup> We are saying that this corrupted but ongoing nature is, itself, praiseworthy in a civil sense and that this should be sufficient for demanding the respect and protection of our fellow humans.

The world as we now experience it is a darkened and polluted picture of how God created it and a dim shadow of what it will become. What was lost by the primordial rebellion was catastrophic. The gospel says that, despite this, humans continue to be the objects of God's unmerited benevolence. We are those whom God loves. That is the basis for the dignity we possess. No quality in me causes God to love me. God is totally free. He is unmoved by any external obligation, need, or force. Everything is gift from first to last. We are valuable because God values us and not the other way around. And you are to value your neighbor because God values him. You owe respect to every human being not because of a substantive element in the other person, which is spiritually meritorious, but because God made that person in His own image, loves him, and has justified him.

### *Human Dignity*

In the societies of the West, the *imago Dei* doctrine still underlies notions of human dignity and from there, human rights. In the aftermath of World War II, attempts were made to codify terms recognizing the dignity of all people. Written under the cloud of the ovens of Auschwitz, the Preamble to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights claims that "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."<sup>87</sup> And the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany of 1949 says, "Human dignity is inviolable. To respect and protect it is the duty of all state authority."<sup>88</sup> The terminology of human dignity is used in these secular documents to defend basic human rights, but definitions remain vague. For that reason, not everyone agrees that the notion of dignity is helpful. Psychologist

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<sup>86</sup> To be fair, Gibbs takes this tone because he is directly addressing the works of Robert Schuller and the gospel of self-esteem. Schuller did have a deficient view of the Fall and an unbiblically optimistic view of human nature and human powers.

<sup>87</sup> United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Geneva: UN, 1948) <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> (Accessed April 10, 2020).

<sup>88</sup> Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) of Germany (1949). [https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch\\_gg/englisch\\_gg.html](https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html)

Steven Pinker calls the idea “stupid.”<sup>89</sup> Philosopher Ruth Macklin considers it an altogether useless concept. To her, the appeal to dignity is nothing more than feel-good sloganeering,<sup>90</sup> and thus it is completely unnecessary.<sup>91</sup> Macklin, Pinker, and others criticize the concept of human dignity as an attempt to smuggle theology into medical ethics. And they do have a point. Philosopher Oliver O’Donovan has observed that any idea of human dignity “is, and only can be, a theological assertion.”<sup>92</sup>

Admittedly, it is difficult to explain from a strictly materialist point of view why every human life ought to receive equal respect. Fortunately, even in our secular age, we still live under some of the residual instincts of Christendom. To illustrate, Gilbert Meilaender refers to a court case which occurred in France involving the practice of “dwarf-tossing.”<sup>93</sup> The little person in question had consented to the nightclub spectacle and even depended on this activity for a living. Modern ethics prioritizes autonomy and consent almost above every other consideration. Interestingly, the French authorities banned “dwarf-tossing” because the “dwarf compromised his own dignity by allowing himself to be used as a projectile, as a mere thing, and that no such concession should be allowed.”<sup>94</sup> A society that is broadly secularized after a long history of Christian influence still knows, at times, that individual autonomy is not always supreme and that some things are simply unacceptable for humans to do to other humans.

In a more recent example, photographs of human cadavers from the Yale University medical school appeared in yearbooks, some accompanied by “lewd captions” in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>95</sup> University officials responded that the medical school students “violated policy” by posing with cadavers and that “we are obligated to treat each of [the donors’]

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<sup>89</sup> Steven Pinker, “The Stupidity of Dignity,” *The New Republic* (May 28, 2008), 28.

<sup>90</sup> Ruth Macklin, “Dignity Is a Useless Concept: It Means No More Than Respect for Persons or Their Autonomy,” *British Medical Journal* 327, no. 7429 (December 2003): 1419.

<sup>91</sup> Macklin, “Dignity Is a Useless Concept,” 1420.

<sup>92</sup> Gilbert Meilaender, “Human Dignity and Public Bioethics,” *The New Atlantis* (Summer 2007): 42.

<sup>93</sup> A practiced banned in 1991 for violating Article 3 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the prohibition of torture, and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

<sup>94</sup> Meilaender, “Human Dignity and Public Bioethics,” 51.

<sup>95</sup> <https://www.ctpost.com/local/article/Report-Yale-Medical-School-students-posed-with-13613062.php>

gifts with the reverence and respect they deserve.”<sup>96</sup> Again, there was the case of a visiting professor at Yale who was depicted in a photo with several dental school students and two severed human heads. As before, the school spokesperson told the Associated Press that the “selfie” taken with severed heads was “an egregious violation of Yale policy.”<sup>97</sup> We are told repeatedly that these actions violated school policies but nothing about violating the people whose bodies were exploited for humor. Somehow instinctively behavior like this still causes offense. We are obligated, the spokesperson said, to treat human remains with “reverence,” a very religious sounding word in a non-religious context.

These cultural instincts are rapidly eroding and as the ethical moorings of our culture are destabilized, pre-Christian attitudes will re-emerge. If we abandon belief in special protection endowed by God for human beings, it is difficult to locate any basis for normative moral judgment whatsoever, and this endangers everyone.<sup>98</sup> As Charles Camosy states: “If we become unable to explain why it is wrong to use a human head for a football, or to sexually exploit a corpse, then something has gone very wrong.”<sup>99</sup>

For many centuries in the West, respect for human life was predicated on theological anthropology, however poorly followed, but dignity underwent a grand reassessment in the pre-modern and modern eras. Whereas previously the belief in man’s divine image guided moral teaching, this was entirely undercut by, among others, the Italian Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola (1463–94) who wrote in *The Oration on Human Dignity* that man is a “creature of indeterminate image.”<sup>100</sup> Dignity is no longer seen as an inalienable gift from the Creator but some greatness we attain for ourselves. Some will then naturally achieve higher dignity than others. Those who live by the appetites of the body, he says, are plants. Those bedazzled by imagination and sensation, “as by the wiles of Calypso,” are brutes. And it is only those who pursue intelligence and wisdom that obtain the divine

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<sup>96</sup> <https://www.ctpost.com/local/article/Report-Yale-Medical-School-students-posed-with-13613062.php>

<sup>97</sup> <https://www.nhregister.com/news/article/Selfie-that-featured-severed-heads-lands-12555163.php>

<sup>98</sup> Charles Camosy, “No View from Nowhere: The Challenge of Grounding Dignity Without Theology,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 41, no. 12 (December 2015): 938.

<sup>99</sup> Camosy, “No View from Nowhere,” 938.

<sup>100</sup> Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. A. Robert Caponigri (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1956), 6.

spark.<sup>101</sup> This elitist stratification of mankind is the sort of judgment which results in atrocities. How could it not? Divine sparks are undeniably superior to plants and brutes.

Honoring human beings on the basis of their self-propelled apotheosis found many enthusiastic apostles. In the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche claimed that new values must be created to replace the traditional ones, and his discussion of the possibility led to his concept of the *Übermensch*, or “superman.” Greatness comes from the pursuit of excellence, he taught.<sup>102</sup> For Nietzsche, humanity bears no inherent dignity: “Man in himself, ... possesses neither dignity, nor rights, nor duties.”<sup>103</sup> Instead, in Nietzsche’s view, strength, intellect, and creativity will be man’s path to self-actualization. Christianity, with its stress on humility and sacrifice, stifles natural greatness.

The concept of human dignity is degraded even further with the animal liberation movement and ethicist Peter Singer of Princeton University. Singer is a polarizing figure to be sure; he is also a culturally important one. Some have called him one of the world’s most seminal philosophers alive today.<sup>104</sup> He has stirred controversies around the globe. One of his more startling positions is that some animals have higher moral status than some humans.<sup>105</sup>

Singer asserts (rightly) that the concept of human exceptionalism is derived from religious dogma, particularly that of Christianity. “Christian tradition,” he writes, “is distinctive for the sharpness of the line it draws between all beings that are members of our species and

<sup>101</sup> “If you see a man dedicated to his stomach, crawling on the ground, you see a plant and not a man; or if you see a man bedazzled by the empty forms of the imagination, as by the wiles of Calypso, and through their alluring solicitations made a slave to his own senses, you see a brute and not a man. If, however, you see a philosopher, judging and distinguishing all things according to the rule of reason, him shall you hold in veneration, for he is a creature of heaven and not of earth; if, finally, a pure contemplator, unmindful of the body, wholly withdrawn into the inner chambers of the mind, here indeed is neither a creature of earth nor a heavenly creature, but some higher divinity, clothed with human flesh.” Pico, *Oration*, 10–1.

<sup>102</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 67ff.

<sup>103</sup> F. Nietzsche, “The Greek State,” in *Early Greek Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. M. Mügge (New York, 1911), 4–5, 17.

<sup>104</sup> Charles Camosy and Peter Singer, *Christian Ethics: Beyond Polarization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>105</sup> Mark Oppenheimer, “The Utility of Peter Singer: Who Lives? Who Dies?,” *Christian Century* (July 2002), 24.

all other beings.”<sup>106</sup> An entity such as a human embryo is certainly a member of the species *homo sapiens*, but that fact alone does not, in his view, grant it the right to live. In fact, he condemns that view as *speciesism*, a bigotry akin to racism which privileges an entity strictly for its species membership.<sup>107</sup>

To be a bearer of rights, he holds, means to be, at a minimum, self-aware and purposeful, qualities which newborns do not yet fully possess.<sup>108</sup> “A week-old baby is not a rational and self-conscious being, and there are many non-human animals whose rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, capacity, and so on, exceed that of a human baby a week or a month old...”<sup>109</sup> Therefore, “the life of a new-born baby is of less value . . . than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee.”<sup>110</sup> Critics often point out that Singer can provide no specific time in a child’s maturation when full personal status is definitely achieved. When asked if he would say that a three-year-old has the right to life, he chillingly replied that “a three-year-old is a gray case.”<sup>111</sup>

The title of Singer’s book, *Unsanctifying Human Life*, says it all. Automatically privileging human life over the lives of animals is untenable, he holds. If humans have no value strictly based on being humans, according to the will of God, then some other rationale for moral status must be established. Without a transcendent guide, however, human valuation will be arbitrary and ultimately decided by those with the most power. If some humans are qualitatively the same as some animals, the strong will inevitably exploit the weak, “Red in tooth and claw.”<sup>112</sup> Isn’t that the way of the jungle, after all?

If there is no such thing as unique human nature and if personhood is only a matter of capacities such as reason and communication, then there is no sound argument for denying personal respect to those

<sup>106</sup> Peter Singer, *Unsanctifying Human Life*, ed. Helga Kuhse (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 228.

<sup>107</sup> The term speciesism was coined in 1970 by Richard D. Ryder in a privately published pamphlet. Peter Singer took the term from Ryder and popularized it in *Animal Liberation* (1975). Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 53–70.

<sup>108</sup> “An infant *Homo sapiens* aged six months would seem to be much less of a “human” than an adult chimpanzee; and if we consider a one-month-old infant, it compares unfavorably with those adult members of other species — pigs, cattle, sheep, rats, chickens, and mice....” Peter Singer, *Unsanctifying Human Life*, 223.

<sup>109</sup> Peter Singer, “Taking life: abortion,” in *Practical Ethics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 118.

<sup>110</sup> Singer, “Taking life,” 118.

<sup>111</sup> Oppenheimer, “Utility of Peter Singer,” 27.

<sup>112</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1850), Canto 56.



animals that reach a certain threshold for those abilities. To prioritize the interests of particular humans merely for being *homo sapiens* would then be senseless bigotry. After all, Koko the gorilla could sign and understand thousands of words, could ask questions, refer to herself, describe her emotions, and give a name to her pet kitten.<sup>113</sup> Koko was not a human being, nor was she a person by Christian determination, but she was hardly incapable of a degree of intelligent thought or its near facsimile.

The rampant confusion on questions of nature, person, and dignity which permeates our times inevitably leads to cruelty. The radically self-centered flesh of mankind puts self-interest ahead of compassion or even mistakes self-interest for compassion. The beacon of God's Word is the only way to steer clear of the rocky shoals. The Lutheran approach to bioethics finds ultimate truth about human life in Scripture and recognizes that everything that we are is a gift from God. Finally, it is God's unmerited favor on account of Jesus Christ that empowers merciful actions on our part.

### Sola Fide

The last *sola* within this exploration of a Lutheran approach to bioethics is *sola fide* (by faith alone), which leads us to examine the role of faith in the Christian walk. The Lutheran view is not that we are justified by faith but sanctified by our own efforts. Rather, sinners are justified through faith alone and it is this reality that enlivens us to godly living. Because the Christian is acquitted from the condemnation of the law (Rom. 8:1), his life is free and joyful. It is in our freedom that we serve others. To serve freely is expressed memorably by Martin Luther in his seminal work, *The Freedom of a Christian*: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."<sup>114</sup>

### Justification and Love

Moralistic religion focuses on right action. Grace religion focuses on right standing. In moralistic religion, right standing is, in some sense, built upon right action. In grace religion, the opposite is true. Right action flows naturally from right standing. We know the content of right action from the law. The law of God is always good. It tells us

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<sup>113</sup> "A Conversation with Koko," *Nature* (PBS, August 8, 1999).  
<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/conversation-koko/12392/>

<sup>114</sup> *LW* 31:344.



what must be done and what must not be done. The Law reveals what it means to be truly human and that we fall short of that standard. The Law makes known the will of God but does not empower us to follow it. Godly living does not emerge from telling ourselves to intensify our efforts. It emerges from God's absolution.

Because we know that our right standing before God comes by grace alone and through faith alone, we are released from incessant worry about His displeasure. Without needing to pull ourselves up the ladder to heaven, we are freed to focus on the needs of the people whose paths we cross. We live lives of love, moved not by fear or the need to win Heaven's approval. Rather, Christian ethics is the outflow of trusting that God is graciously oriented toward sinners on account of Christ.

Love is the fruit of faith, and it is impossible for love to be inert. Love always gives, always creates, always shares. God, who is love, speaks, and acts for the benefit of His beloved. Then transformed by divine love into people characterized by love, Christians help and support the bodily needs of those we encounter, including the unborn, the disabled, the dying, the sick, the aged, and the forgotten. Defending the lives of others and intervening when the strong exploit the weak is simply a matter of being what you have been restored to be. It is living out the divine life you have been given (*sola gratia*) and making Christ present in the world through your vocations. Christian bioethics is not a legalistic add-on to the faith. It is simply part of what it looks like to have our humanity restored by God's grace.

On loving God and loving neighbor, the apostle John states: "How can one love God, whom he has *not* seen, if he does not love his neighbor, whom he *has* seen?"<sup>115</sup> Could this not also be inverted to say: "How can you love your neighbor whom you see, if you do not love God whom you do not see?" Love of God precedes the love of neighbor. Luther explained in the *Small Catechism* that helping and supporting our neighbor in every physical need proceeds from our love (and fear) for God.<sup>116</sup> The greatest commandment is to love God and the second is like it, to love your neighbor as yourself. Furthermore, you cannot love

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<sup>115</sup> "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar. For how can anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, love God, whom he has not seen? This then is the command we have from him: The one who loves God should also love his brother." 1 Jn. 4:19–21, EHV.

<sup>116</sup> "We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs." SC Ten Commandments 10.

the neighbor whom you see if you do not love the neighbor you cannot see (say, *in utero*). Faith does not depend upon sight, nor does love.

The fulfillment of the first commandment, Luther teaches, is faith in God, and the fruit of faith is loving service. As the Reformer wrote: "...the work that fulfills [the first commandment, namely faith] is the first, noblest, and best work from which and to which all others flow..."<sup>117</sup> Righteous action proceeds from justifying faith. And righteous action is summed up by love (Rom. 13:10). Christian love cannot be separated from Christian faith. As Luther put it: "Love is true and genuine where there is true and genuine faith."<sup>118</sup> Love is the tool through which faith works.<sup>119</sup>

Life in God bears fruit from the inside out.<sup>120</sup> A living tree does not need to be harangued to produce fruit. It does so because it is alive. It may need, at times, to undergo the trauma of being pruned for God does chasten those whom He loves (Heb. 12:6). But the fruit tree has been created with the nature of a fruit tree. By bearing fruit, it is doing what is its nature to do, nothing more and nothing less. Fruit-bearing is not a bonus feature or even a surprise. Fruit-bearing is a constitutive element of the kind of thing a fruit tree is. A tree that bears no fruit is a dead tree. A tree that bears only rotten fruit may as well be. It is dead, dying, or artificial. It is human nature to love, and understanding the ways that faith and love are inter-related sets a foundation for a Lutheran approach to bioethics.

As human life is not lived in a silo and so-called rugged individualism is a "false and misleading dream,"<sup>121</sup> being truly human according to the work and will of God is generally social. We are designed to live in fellowship with God and one another. For Luther, ethics is always about serving the needs of the neighbor. This brings us to the doctrine of vocation. Vocation is an ancillary of the doctrine of creation. You are I are God's means for His ongoing work of creating and sustaining the world. As fallen sinful beings, we distort God's plan and abuse our callings through selfishness, greed, and malice. Selfishness is the opposite

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<sup>117</sup> Martin Luther, *Treatise on Good Works 1520*, The Annotated Luther Study Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 275.

<sup>118</sup> LW 31:371.

<sup>119</sup> LW 27:29.

<sup>120</sup> "So let him who wishes to do good works begin not with the doing of good works, but with believing, which makes the person good, for nothing makes a man good except faith, or evil except unbelief." LW 31:362.

<sup>121</sup> Paul Speratus, "Salvation unto Us Has Come" in *Lutheran Service Book*, 555 v3.

of vocation. Vocation is God serving my neighbor through me, not me serving myself by means of my neighbor. The true picture of vocation is evident in a Christmas sermon, where Martin Luther said that “the Christian becomes a vessel, or rather a channel, through which the fountain of divine blessings continuously flows to other individuals.”<sup>122</sup>

## Conclusion

People have been doing bioethics as long as they have been caring for the sick. There has never been a time when people under the care of others have not been vulnerable. But modern medical technologies combined with “the basic principles of the world, which are not in accord with Christ”<sup>123</sup> compound the danger. A common maxim is that just because we can do something does not mean that we should do it. Churches need to teach those who are entrusted with caring for the vulnerable of their duties when encountering bioethical dilemmas. Walking in accordance with the fifth commandment includes the expectation that Christians prevent, protect, and save others from suffering bodily harm or injury.<sup>124</sup>

Theological anthropology drawn from Scripture provides the conceptual bedrock for making moral decisions in hospital or hospice. One of the core problems is that people do not know what they are and much of what they think they know, they get wrong. If people do not know what they are, they will misdiagnose their maladies and seek solace in lies. They will make life choices that only pour gasoline on the fires. By contrast, the ministry of the Church is to put reality into focus through the Word of God, to teach us what we are by grace, to correctly

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<sup>122</sup> Martin Luther, “Second Christmas Sermon, Titus 3:4–8,” in *Luther’s Christmas Sermons: Epistles*, trans. John Nicholas Lenker (Minneapolis: The Luther Press, 1908), 145.

<sup>123</sup> “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, which are in accord with human tradition, namely, the basic principles of the world, but not in accord with Christ.” Col. 2:8, EHV.

<sup>124</sup> Luther’s explanation of the fifth commandment in *The Large Catechism*: “[T]his commandment is violated not only when we do evil, but also when we have the opportunity to do good to our neighbors and to prevent, protect, and save them from suffering bodily harm or injury, but fail to do so.” LC Ten Commandments 189; “... if you see anyone who is condemned to death or in similar peril and do not save him although you have the means and ways to do so, you have killed him. It will be of no help for you to use the excuse that you did not assist their deaths by word or deed, for you have withheld your love from them and robbed them of the kindness by means of which their lives might have been saved.” LC Ten Commandments 190; “Therefore, God rightly calls all persons murderers who do not offer counsel or assistance to those in need and peril of body and life.” LC Ten Commandments 191.

diagnose our problems and administer “the medicine of immortality,<sup>125</sup> the antidote to death,” which is Jesus Christ. He is our hope, our justification, and our sanctification. The Lord’s absolution spoken from the cross assures troubled consciences of pardon when people miss the mark and imparts the Spirit for the wisdom and love needed in our most pressing concerns. LSQ

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<sup>125</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, “Epistle to the Ephesians” in *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, trans. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), ch. 20.



# Lutheran Social Ethics: Two Modes of Providence and the Battle for Office

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**F**OUNDATIONAL TO LUTHERAN SOCIAL ETHICS are the doctrines of the Two Kingdoms and of Vocation. Unfortunately, the key terms of these doctrines may easily mislead, and they are open to more than one legitimate interpretation. Should we understand the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world in Augustinian terms, as comprised of two distinct classes of people, Christians and non-Christians? Or should we focus instead on God's two modes of governance, the eternal and the temporal, which overlap in the Christian because he is in the world but not of it, and simultaneously saint and sinner? Likewise, shall we, like many theologians, focus exclusively on vocation as a calling reserved for Christians, or shall we broaden our account to include various offices and orders of creation instituted by God, which shape and affect Christians and non-Christians alike?

The choice of interpretation here will also affect our understanding of the battle between God and Satan over every human soul. On one reading, this is a battle between redeemed Christians and the unbelieving world. But on another reading, it is a battle waged over every office, inside and outside the church, where God calls us to obedient service and Satan calls for disobedience and subversion of God's design.

Certainly, we should be clear about what we mean by our key terms. But what really matters is that our choice of interpretation is faithful to the biblical record, distinctively Lutheran, and a source of illumination

for a wide variety of ethical issues and dilemmas. Therefore, in the first part of this paper, I will offer a reading of “Two Kingdoms” and “Vocation” that I argue satisfies these requirements. Then I will develop the implications of this reading for several important topics of Lutheran social ethics: the family, education, government, and the church. The goal in each case will be to distinguish God’s intentions for an office from the sinful temptation to abdicate, subvert, or usurp that office.

## Two Modes of Providence

In his classic work on Lutheran social ethics, Paul Althaus argued that Luther himself held different understandings of the Two Kingdoms. Early on, Althaus claims, Luther was influenced by Augustine’s view of the fundamental opposition between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. In his 1523 Treatise, “Temporal Authority: To What Extent Should it be Obeyed,” Luther says:

[W]e must divide the children of Adam and all mankind into two classes, the first belonging to the kingdom of God, the second to the kingdom of the world. Those who belong to the kingdom of God are all the true believers who are in Christ and under Christ.... [T]hese people need no temporal law and sword ... because the righteous man of his own accord does all and more than the law demands.... All who are not Christian belong to the kingdom of the world and are under the law.... For this reason God has ordained two governments: the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ; and the temporal, which restrains the un-Christian and wicked.<sup>1</sup>

Althaus notes that this way of dividing the kingdoms suggests a purely negative view of the world as the sphere of rebellion against God governed by Satan. He writes:

[A]ll true believers in Christ belong to the kingdom of God and all other people belong to the kingdom of this world. In this usage, world means the sinful world under the lordship of Satan... This already implies that those who believe in Christ, because they no longer stand under the law, do not need this earthly government,

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, “Temporal Authority: To What Extent Should it be Obeyed” (1523), in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd ed., ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 435–6.

law, and the sword—all this is necessary only for the sake of other people.<sup>2</sup>

Althaus complains that on this reading, the Left-Hand Kingdom is reduced to the state's negative role in restraining evil amongst worldly people, but it does not include any positive blessings, and is unnecessary for Christians.

It may be disputed whether Althaus's exposition of Luther is entirely correct, as it can be argued that Luther has a relatively narrow focus in this treatise. One might argue that in "Temporal Authority," Luther is really contrasting the inner man of faith—the Christian *qua* Christian—who is free from the law, and the outer man—the old Adam—who is still governed by temporal authority. His overarching concern is that temporal authority does not overreach and claim to be lord of the Christian's conscience, something reserved for God alone. If so, Luther could admit that, as a whole person, the Christian is both free of the law (*qua* redeemed saint, the new person in Christ) and bound by the law (*qua* sinner, the old Adam). Thus, Gustav Wingren argues that when the early Luther says that Christians need no law, we should read this as "an abbreviated mode of expression," as he is really only talking about the inner man of faith: "In reality, a Christian is of course a sinner even while he is righteous, and as sinner he is subject to the law.... Luther often emphasizes the simultaneity of these two governments over one and the same person."<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, Althaus seems right that the early Luther unduly narrows the purpose of God's Left-Hand Kingdom to the first use of the law, curbing evil, and this ignores the fact that God instituted various offices and orders of creation even before sin entered the world. For example, before the fall, God assigned all human beings the office of stewardship of the world entrusted to our care (Gen. 1:28) and He instituted marriage as an order of creation, the proper context for bringing new human life into the world (Gen. 2:24). More generally, while God does authorize the temporal authorities to punish and restrain evil (Gen. 9:6; Rom. 13), he also employs them as a positive blessing, as when Joseph uses his position to store grain that saves people from starvation. As Luther's thought develops, he broadens the idea of the Left-Hand Kingdom to include all the ways God governs the temporal

<sup>2</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 51.

<sup>3</sup> Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 26.



sphere, and this includes positive blessings as well as coercive restraint of evil. As Althaus explains:

As soon as Luther began to speak of secular government in a broader sense, including such matters as marriage and property, he could no longer identify the power of evil among men as the basis for secular government ... For according to Luther, marriage and property are instituted in paradise and originally have nothing to do with the fall into sin.... The two governments no longer deal with two distinct groups, the believers and the unbelievers; rather, both affect the life of the children of God in two different areas of one and the same life.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, it is important to emphasize the profound differences between the Two Kingdoms: the Left-Hand Kingdom only encompasses the temporal and human works which cannot save, while the Right-Hand Kingdom includes the eternal and God's work to save mankind. But in Luther's mature understanding of the Two Kingdoms, we see that they also have a profound commonality. Both kingdoms are sources of blessing. Even before the fall, it was not good for the man to be alone (Gen. 2: 18), so God institutes marriage, and even before the fall, he makes us stewards of His world, thereby granting property. Moreover, government is not only there to restrain evil, but also to make sure that basic goods like food, shelter, and education, are distributed to citizens. Thus, the orders of the Left-Hand Kingdom are means by which God blesses the temporal sphere, just as the church and its means of grace are avenues by which God provides eternal blessings to repentant sinners in the Right-Hand Kingdom.

Moreover, a deeper understanding of the Two Kingdoms helps us to overcome the false notion that they are opposing and dissonant modes of God's rule, suggesting a schizophrenic alternation between a loving "good Cop" God and a vengeful "bad Cop" God. Rather, both kingdoms issue from the same loving and merciful God, and both are ways He cares for His creation. Of God's rule in both kingdoms, the same promise applies: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jer. 29:11). Despite the fall into sin, and even through our sinful actions, God provides for His people's temporal and eternal needs. Thus, though his brothers sinned by selling Joseph into slavery, God used this action to save many people from starvation during a famine (Gen. 50:20). And

<sup>4</sup> Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, 52–3.

through Judas's sinful betrayal of Christ, God worked the salvation of all mankind by Christ's atoning sacrifice.

We may even say that, rightly understood, God's institution of coercive restraint and punishment for wrongdoing is itself a blessing: it is a way that God helps to preserve this world from being overrun with evil. This point becomes easier to appreciate when one considers the implications of a lawless society, where citizens are afraid to leave their own homes and are in constant fear of being attacked or robbed. Without the security of strong law enforcement, few of God's other temporal blessings can be retained.

In my view, the best way to understand the deep unity between the Two Kingdoms is to see both of them as *modes of God's providence*. The Left-Hand Kingdom encompasses all those God-ordained means of preserving and developing the temporal order, and the Right-Hand Kingdom encompasses all those God-ordained means of uniting believers with Him in eternity. In both modes of providence, God shows His love for all people, not only believers. Thus, in the temporal sphere, He makes the sun rise and the rain fall for both believers and unbelievers (Mt. 5: 45), and both benefit from the institutions of marriage, property, and government. And in the eternal sphere, God desires everyone to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), and offers up His Son as a once and for all atoning sacrifice (Heb. 10:12) for all mankind (1 Timothy 2:6). Further, God works through means in both kingdoms, instituting various orders and offices to preserve the world in His Left-Hand rule, and instituting the church to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments as His means of grace in His Right-Hand rule.

### **Vocation and Office, and the Battle between God and Satan**

There is thus a deep connection between God's Two Kingdom rule and the various vocations and offices by which he governs. Wingren explains:

Both governments are expressions of God's love. In his vocation man does works which effect the well-being of others; for so God has made all offices. Through this work in man's offices, God's creative work goes forward, and that creative work is love.... Thus love comes from God, flowing down to human beings on earth through all vocations, through both spiritual and earthly governments.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 27–8.

One reason to restrict the term “vocation” to Christians is that it is helpful to consider what difference being a Christian should make to how one conducts an office. On the other hand, both Christians and non-Christians occupy offices or stations (“*stands*”), which are instituted by God to change the office holder. For example, “At work in marriage is a power which compels self-giving to spouse and children. So it is the ‘station’ itself which is the ethical agent, for it is God who is active through the law on earth.”<sup>6</sup> As a result even the married unbeliever is compelled by his office to provide for his spouse and family. But stations are solely coercive for the unbeliever: by nature, he is turned in on himself through self-love, so God makes him provide for his neighbor. Yet, matters are different for the Christian office-holder. He also is afflicted by sinful resistance to God’s will, arising from the old Adam that does not want to serve. But this is where the Christian is set free through his daily baptismal regeneration (Rom. 6:1-14). As Wingren says, this happens in a very concrete place, our vocation, where God sends His crosses to kill the old sinful man and raise the new person in Christ. Remarkably, this effects a transition from the Left-Hand Kingdom under the law and coercion to the Right-Hand Kingdom of grace and Christian liberty. Wingren writes: “The Christian is crucified by the law in his vocation, under the earthly government; and he arises through the gospel in the church under the spiritual government.”<sup>7</sup> As the old Adam is put to death, the new person in Christ arises who forgets himself and spontaneously desires to aid his neighbor. That new creation is no longer under the law and not only fulfills, but overfulfills the law. Office is then transformed from a matter of duty or necessity to something freely embraced by the Christian. It is not something we have to do, but a privilege to be God’s co-worker. But there is no one-time final victory for the Christian in this life. Every day, the old man arises and resists vocation, and every day, he must be put to death so that God’s love works through us to serve our neighbor. This provides a very concrete understanding of what it means to say that the Christian life is one of daily repentance, in which we are called to make of ourselves living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1).

As challenging as all this sounds, it is made even more difficult by the fact that vocations and offices are a major focus of the battle between God and Satan over every human soul. It is important to consider what this means in practice for both Christians and non-Christians in a

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<sup>6</sup> Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 30.

variety of important offices. In "Temporal Authority," Luther is especially concerned about two matters. The first is that, whether Christian or not, those occupying positions of temporal authority may be tempted to think they have ultimate authority over the conscience, which is God's alone to judge. The second is that Christians who are office holders may be tempted to think that their office exempts them from obligations that apply to all Christians, so that they fail to be *Christian* office holders, even though they are Christians *and* office holders. Both of these are so clearly relevant to contemporary issues that they deserve close attention.

Significantly, Luther says that Part Two of "Temporal Authority," entitled, "How Far Temporal Authority Extends," is "the main part of the treatise."<sup>8</sup> He clarifies that temporal authority, by which he principally means governance by political leaders, judges, and others who can coerce the compliance of citizens with the law, can legitimately rule only our outer life, not the soul: "The temporal government has laws which extend no further than to life and property and external affairs on earth, for God cannot and will not permit anyone but himself to rule over the soul."<sup>9</sup> Satan, however, is at work, deluding office holders that they have final authority over the inner conscience as well. In Luther's day, there were attempts to confiscate copies of the New Testament and to compel acceptance of other books.<sup>10</sup>

Luther's response to this government overreach is that it shows a misunderstanding of the inevitable limits of temporal authority. Since temporal authorities cannot save (Ps. 146:3), they have neither the power nor the right to dictate the terms of salvation, which are reserved by God alone. Luther points out that man cannot discern the heart and therefore in coercing the conscience is like "a judge who should blindly decide cases which he neither hears nor sees."<sup>11</sup> Only God knows the heart, so only He is competent to judge it. Moreover, following Augustine, Luther argues that temporal authorities neither can, nor should they try, to coerce the conscience. No-one can be made to believe something which in their heart they think is false, and the attempt to require belief will at best "compel weak consciences to lie, to disavow, and to utter what is not in their hearts."<sup>12</sup> Those of strong conscience will be unjustly punished because they will not disavow their conviction,

<sup>8</sup> Luther, "Temporal Authority," 444.

<sup>9</sup> Luther, "Temporal Authority," 445.

<sup>10</sup> Luther, "Temporal Authority," 449.

<sup>11</sup> Luther, "Temporal Authority," 446.

<sup>12</sup> Luther, "Temporal Authority," 447.

and those of weak conscience will be degraded, as they are pressured to say what they do not believe.

In fact, Luther thought that in his day the Church and State had their proper vocations exchanged. The church was using temporal power to enforce worldly changes, when its only legitimate power was over the soul through the Word of God, and the State was neglecting its temporal duty to serve and protect the people while attempting to govern their conscience: “they rule the souls with iron and the bodies with letters, so that worldly princes rule in a spiritual way, and spiritual princes rule in a worldly way.”<sup>13</sup>

Luther paints us a clear picture of how Satan was attempting to subvert office in his time. On the one hand, Satan tempted office holders to abdicate their true office, so that princes were preoccupied with “dancing, hunting, and racing,”<sup>14</sup> and not the welfare of their people, and the church is more concerned with punitive taxation for its building projects than with maintaining true doctrine and faithfully preaching the Gospel. On the other hand, Satan also tempted people to usurp offices that had not been entrusted to them, so that the princes attempted to prescribe religious reading and practice, as if they were lords of conscience, and the church employed armies, as if Christ’s kingdom were of this world, something he explicitly denied (Jn. 18:36).

While there are many differences between Luther’s European Reformation context and our contemporary scene, it is not hard to see that Satan is still at work attempting to subvert offices. There has been a dramatic escalation of cases in which authorities have attempted to coerce the Christian conscience. Government employees who conscientiously objected to some or all versions of the COVID vaccines were routinely told that their choices were accepting vaccination or losing their job. In some areas, Christians are also being required to use other employees’ preferred pronouns even if the former cannot in good conscience agree that those pronouns are an accurate reflection of biological reality. Similar problems arise for those female athletes who do not believe that biological men claiming to be women are in fact women. So we have secular authorities hard at work, invading the sphere of conscience which is reserved for God alone. These are clear examples of usurpation of office, as secular authorities have no jurisdiction over the conscience.

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<sup>13</sup> Luther, “Temporal Authority,” 451.

<sup>14</sup> Luther, “Temporal Authority,” 454.

At the same time, we see many signs of abdication of office. The governing authorities are instituted by God for the welfare of the people. But Satan tempts office holders to see their office as an entitlement to gain more power, influence, and wealth for themselves and their friends, and as a means of imposing agendas without the consent of the governed. Notably, we have office holders today who are beholden to globalist interests and who enact policies that serve these interests even if they undermine the welfare of the citizens within their jurisdiction. Thus in Europe, feverish attempts to meet net-zero goals by drastic reduction of fossil fuels led to skyrocketing energy prices and brown-outs, so that elderly people on fixed incomes have been forced to choose between heating their house and getting enough food. Environmental stewardship is indeed an obligation for all Christians, but leaders cannot rightly neglect the needs of their neighbors, the citizens entrusted to their care.

### *Christians in Office*

Luther is especially concerned that Christian office holders are not deceived into thinking that their office is a license to follow their own desires: “they actually think they can do—and order their subjects to do—whatever they please.”<sup>15</sup> In Part Three of “Temporal Authority,” Luther reminds the Christian prince that as a Christian, he “must give consideration and attention to his subjects, and really devote himself to it.”<sup>16</sup> As Christ, our spiritual ruler, came to serve us, so Christian princes are called to “serve and protect [their subjects], listen to their problems and defend them, and govern them to the sole end that they, not [the prince], may benefit and profit.”<sup>17</sup> Luther is very clear that he is not here giving directions to how anyone, Christian or not, should conduct his office, but how anyone occupying that office is to act if he is a Christian.

This is very important, as throughout history, Christians have been tempted to think that while they as Christians should do (or refrain from doing) some action, still they must do otherwise if their office requires them to do so. This idea gains plausibility from the fact that a Christian judge should forgive a criminal as a Christian but must demand punishment as a judge. Yet for Luther, this is no contradiction. *Qua* Christian, the judge can and should forgive the criminal, but *qua* representative of God’s temporal rule, he must also carry out his

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<sup>15</sup> Luther, “Temporal Authority,” 431–2.

<sup>16</sup> Luther, “Temporal Authority,” 453.

<sup>17</sup> Luther, “Temporal Authority,” 454.

office. However, this distinction, between the obligations of the inner and outer man, should not be confused with the idea that holding an office exempts the Christian from God's commands in his capacity as an office holder.

Thus, notoriously, members of the *Deutsche Christen* (the "German Christians"), understood Romans 13 to require unconditional allegiance to the Nazi government in all areas of secular life, so that one could worship God on Sunday but set aside His law by complicity in state sponsored genocide during the rest of the week. Luther's thought that there is no such escape hatch for the Christian conscience was well-expressed by the Barmen Declaration (1934), article 8.15: "We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords—areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him."<sup>18</sup>

Thus, just as no office holder is authorized to abdicate his office or to usurp another's, so Christian office holders may not walk away from their Christian responsibilities: their call to be Christians takes precedence over their call to any other office, for otherwise they are violating the first commandment, and placing another lord higher than Christ.

Luther also warns of the temptation to abuse delegation. Leaders need helpers to accomplish their tasks, and so they must delegate some work to others. But Luther rightly insists that one may not delegate responsibility, for though we should love our helpers, and to some extent trust them, we should not trust them as if they were God. We must retain responsibility for actions even when we are aided by others, and we must keep our final trust where it belongs, in God. Delegation of work is therefore not abdication, either of personal responsibility or of our need to trust God.

These same conflicts between God's purposes for vocation and office and Satan's attempted subversion of them play out in a variety of arenas in Luther's time and today: the family, education, government, and the church. In every case, Lutheran social ethics must be grounded in God's design for His institutions and offices, and it should explain how to discern and counter attempts to thwart that design.

## The Family

In *The Large Catechism*, Luther develops his whole account of God-ordained authority by extension from our obligation to honor our

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<sup>18</sup> This text is available in many places, including: <https://cathedralofhope.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Theological-Declaration-of-Barmen.pdf>.



father and mother as God's representatives. God does not only ask us to love our parents but also to honor them:

But he distinguishes father and mother above all other persons on earth, and places them next to himself. For it is a much higher thing to honor than to love. Honor includes not only love, but also deference, humility, and modesty directed (so to speak) toward a majesty concealed within them. ... It must therefore be impressed on young people that they revere their parents as God's representatives, and to remember that, however lowly, poor, feeble, and eccentric they may be, they are still their mother and father, given by God.<sup>19</sup>

Luther sees the family as the God-ordained place where one learns proper respect for authority in both the Left and Right-Hand Kingdoms: "For all other authority is derived and developed out of the authority of parents."<sup>20</sup> Thus schoolmasters teach *in loco parentis*, and, on account of their office, we should view our leaders in temporal government and in the church as fathers also.<sup>21</sup> In no case is this license for tyranny, "For [God] does not want scoundrels or tyrants in this office or authority."<sup>22</sup> Instead, their office implies duties, and these duties are "not only to provide for the material support of their children, servants, subjects, etc., but especially to bring them up to the praise and honor of God."<sup>23</sup> Thus a key principle is that office-holders only rightly see their office as under God's authority and existing for His loving purposes.

One may think of the family as a miniature society, in which children and their parents both learn what respect is due to temporal authority, and, if it is a Christian family, it is also a miniature church in which children and their parents both learn what respect is due to the spiritual fathers of the church. Since marriage and the family are instituted by God to uphold order in both temporal and eternal matters, to build civil society and the body of Christ, any attempt to subvert that order must be resisted. Whatever *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) may say, marriage is not defined by human beings as an affirmation of any and every inclination and relationship they may prefer. Marriage is a God-ordained building block for both society and the church, and He

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<sup>19</sup> LC Ten Commandments 105–108.

<sup>20</sup> LC Ten Commandments 141.

<sup>21</sup> LC Ten Commandments 158–66.

<sup>22</sup> LC Ten Commandments 168.

<sup>23</sup> LC Ten Commandments 168.



has called one man and one woman to be joined together in one-flesh marriage.

If we lose this normative structure, marriage is disconnected from its purpose of building a stable foundation for raising society's citizens and the church's members, and becomes a domain of endless experimentation premised on the idea that self-realization is more important than the good of others. Luther argues that those who fail to respect their earthly parents and the God-ordained structures of marriage and the family will tend also to disrespect temporal and spiritual authority. If we can have marriage and family on our own terms, why not civil society and the church as well? The concern is that the state is reduced to a dispenser of entitlements for people to follow their selfish desires, and the church must offer a wide range of individualized therapies in place of the one Gospel with which it has been entrusted.

Marriage has also become a battleground in which Satan tempts authorities to violate the Christian conscience. If the State requires officials to solemnize same-sex marriages, what happens if they conscientiously object? Does the State have the authority to compel bakers, florists, and other suppliers of wedding services to offer their goods on the terms specified by same-sex couples seeking marriage? What will happen if plural or other non-standard forms of marriage are recognized? In all of these cases, Christians in office have important obligations. They should not violate their conscience, though they may pay a heavy price for refusing to do so. But their protest is also important as an encouragement to other Christians and as a witness to non-Christians. Many non-Christians also support traditional marriage and are dismayed by its redefinition, so when they see that their own secular worldviews, rooted in autonomy and self-realization, are the source of the problem, but also see that Christianity has resources to explain and defend traditional marriage, they have a reason to reconsider their dismissal of Christianity.

More generally, as the actual fallout of post-Christian thinking becomes increasingly obvious, many are looking for a stronger foundation for their beliefs and this should renew their interest in the Christian faith. It is not only Christians, but many secularists, who think there is something absurd about self-defined genders. Surely, we do not become a different kind of being simply by thinking of ourselves as that kind of being: a pauper does not become a king by thinking he is king, and a dog-lover does not become a dog by thinking he is a dog. So if we face the reality that we have a given nature, that may lead us to realize that

we are creatures, not self-creators, and that may prompt us to ask who our creator is.

## Education

Luther's plan for educational reform falls out of his Two Kingdoms theology. From the Right-Hand Kingdom, since God wants all people to be saved, everyone should be educated so that they can have access to the Scriptures. But in order to do that, they must learn how to read, and they must master relevant languages, have good literary judgment, and develop their analytical and logical abilities, so that they can discern the doctrines that flow from Scripture and their implications for their lives. From the Left-Hand Kingdom, it is vital that young people learn respect for authority and are able to carry out their vocations as parents, citizens, and office holders so that they serve as effective means of God's providence for humanity's temporal needs. An understanding of clear communication, how to make a reasoned case, and of the purpose and function of civil institutions, government, and law (once called "civics") are essential. So is inculcation and training in virtue to promote civil righteousness.

For Luther, education is fundamentally about preservation: preservation of the Gospel, and preservation of civil society. He especially emphasized that the Gospel cannot be maintained without due study of the languages in which its good news is found:

[W]e will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which the sword of the Spirit [Eph, 6:17] is contained; they are the casket in which the jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which the wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored.<sup>24</sup>

Likewise, he argued that treasure, walls, buildings, and arms are not enough to maintain a civilized city, whose "best and greatest welfare, safety, and strength consist rather in its having many able, learned, wise, honorable, and well-educated citizens."<sup>25</sup> From all of this, Luther is able to motivate a broad, rigorous, model of Christian liberal arts education that should be made available to all, girls as well as boys, the poor as well

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<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of all Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools (1524)," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 468.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of all Cities in Germany," 465.

as the wealthy.<sup>26</sup> Ironically, given our current context, Luther saw this as a call for universal public education that the civil authorities had an obligation to provide.

Yet education also has become a place of conflict between God and Satan. In some of our public schools, the basic tools of literacy and critical thinking are neglected, but students are indoctrinated with a variety of troubling ideologies. In the guise of “science,” they are told that gender is a choice and some students are encouraged to pursue physically and psychologically damaging hormone therapy and gender reassignment surgery. In the guise of educating children about racial problems, students are told that the abstract property “whiteness” confers an inevitable responsibility for racism, and “systemic racism” is advanced as the only possible explanation for disparate educational and social outcomes. Lutherans should object to this on two main grounds. First, teachers who engage in this kind of indoctrination are guilty of abdicating their assigned duty to help students to develop their own ability to think. Second, they are, like some of the princes of Luther’s day, making the false claim that they are lords of the students’ consciences. They have neither the right nor the authority to judge a person’s conscience by imputing guilt on the grounds of “whiteness” and they are wrongly attempting to impose a contested view of the nature of racism on students who have every right to disagree. The claim that it is only by adopting a tendentious ideology about racism that one can avoid being a racist is so obviously fallacious that an appropriate response would be to require such teachers to take a class in logic, perhaps entitled “logic sensitivity training.” Reading some of Thomas Sowell’s works would also help to disabuse them of the idea that no well-informed person holds a view contrary to the one they are promulgating.<sup>27</sup>

When we move to Christian schools and universities, we see that they are not free from the conflict between God and Satan either. Accepting federal funds and external accreditation has fueled a large academic bureaucracy, keen to measure and control Christian education according to criteria that sometimes conflict with an institution’s stated

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<sup>26</sup> For more on the origins and development of Lutheran classical education, see Thomas Korcok, *Lutheran Education: From Wittenberg to the Future* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011); Joel D. Heck and Angus Menuge, eds., *Learning at the Foot of the Cross* (Austin: Concordia University Press); and Scott A. Ashmon, ed., *The Idea and Practice of a Christian University: A Lutheran Approach* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> A good place to start is Thomas Sowell, *Discrimination and Disparities*, enlarged edition (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

mission and purpose. Accrediting bodies themselves adopt positions on such controversial topics as “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” which ought to be left as subjects of academic debate. Endless demands for data about academic programs disrupt the actual vocations of teachers and professors (teaching, mentoring, and scholarship) to feed impersonal data systems, thereby justifying the existence of many petty bureaucrats whose activities do not obviously aid anybody’s actual education.

St. Paul warns us of those who are not busy (engaged in helping a particular neighbor), but are “busybodies” (2 Thess. 3:11). What busybodies do is to undermine genuine vocations while not serving the needs of any particular human being. Notice that this subverts the very idea of Christian management developed by Luther. The holder of a high office has the moral responsibility of supporting and encouraging the vocations of those entrusted to his care. There is no such thing as a legitimate vocation that exists to undermine other people’s vocations and which cannot identify particular neighbors that are helped by its work. So Christian administrators in education should take a close look at whether state requirements are getting in the way of their obligation to promote and support the vocations of teachers and students.

## Government

The Constitution of the United States is supposed to protect freedom of conscience and expression, but these and many other liberties have been severely compromised by government overreach. During the COVID lockdowns, we saw clear discrimination against churches, when the capacities for people permitted to attend church services were much lower than those available to secular businesses. The conscientious objections of many students, healthcare professionals, and state employees to vaccine mandates were frequently ignored. Either no recourse to file an objection was offered or the objections were overruled without serious consideration of their grounds.

There are disturbing signs in many countries that we are slouching toward a model of civil society in which dissent from government policies is viewed as a subversive, criminal act, rather than a constitutionally protected freedom. Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau’s brutal suppression of the truckers’ protests in Ottawa is an egregious example. In Holland, though their intent has been disputed, police have on more than one occasion fired live ammunition when farmers protested proposed bans on nitrogen. In my view, the harsh treatment of some of those associated with the January 6<sup>th</sup> protest in Washington, DC is

another example: lengthy pre-trial imprisonment violates enumerated constitutional rights and even basic human rights. In all of these cases, by suppressing the expression of dissenting beliefs, the government is claiming a right it does not have, to be lord of citizens' conscience.

At the same time, just as some teachers seem to be remarkably uninterested in education, we have seen a proliferation of mayors that do not embrace the demands of their office to serve and protect people. A refusal to enforce laws against violent crimes has made many inner cities unsafe and has prompted businesses to leave, to the detriment of many poor and minority individuals who live there. Loyalty to an abstract ideology about racial justice has been placed ahead of caring for the actual citizens, including minorities, entrusted to an official's care.

In this context, Christian politicians have a special responsibility to model a different way of relating to citizens. They should listen to, and care about, the welfare and concerns of citizens, even if they personally disagree with them. When they do, they may discover, for example, that many minority families want school choice and are increasingly in favor of parochial and classical alternatives to public education. They may find that the economic hardship imposed by rising energy prices and resultant inflation is a serious problem for many working families. Likewise, the Lutheran senator Ron Johnson of Wisconsin has listened to those with conscientious objections to COVID vaccine mandates and given a voice to those suffering vaccine-related injuries. A Christian leader should never silence or delegitimize pain because it ought not to exist according to some preconceived narrative.

## The Church

The Scriptures are clear that there is only one Gospel (Gal. 1:6-9). This Gospel consists of the acts of God in the saving work of the person Jesus Christ. As completely *extra nos*, it is not up for debate and cannot be redefined or tailored to suit our preferred worldviews or lifestyles. We have the Great Commission and Christ's institution of the sacraments as the means of grace. We must "guard the good deposit entrusted" to us (2 Tim. 1:14) and serve as "ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us" (2 Cor. 5:20). While we should study our audience and understand its worldview, we have no call to modify the Gospel or to exchange it for some other agenda.

Sadly, Satan is just as busy battling God in the church as he is outside it. What we see in some mainline churches is the rise of an eclectic, self-centered theology that offers up what suits the passions of

worldly “itching ears” (2 Tim. 4:3). A popular approach is for the pastor to engage in autobiographical musings that encourage a similar, inward-looking focus in the congregation, and distract us from what God has done to save us. At one ELCA church I attended, an Assemblies of God pastor gave a sermon about his recent mission trip to build houses for the poor. He confessed that he discovered on that trip that construction was not his gift. I waited expectantly for him to say something about how our vocational failures drive us to see our need for Christ, for the one who perfectly followed his vocations of keeping the law and atoning for our sins. But this connection to the Gospel never happened: all I learned was that this man, like me, is not very handy about the house. So by C.F.W. Walther’s standards, this message was not a sermon, because it did not preach the Gospel.

More troubling is the tendency of some clergy to think that they can redesign the Gospel. For example, the Reverend Ann Holmes Redding, an Episcopal Priestess in Seattle, declared, “I am both Muslim and Christian, just like I’m both an American of African descent and a woman. I’m 100 percent both.”<sup>28</sup> She admitted that this was not about the intellect, but that she simply resonated with aspects of both religions. Yet the contents of Islam and Christianity cannot be reconciled: Christianity affirms the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Resurrection, but Islam explicitly denies all three doctrines. Islam views Jesus as a great human prophet, but denies that he is the Son of God, and denies that we need a mediator to be saved. Doubtless, Rev. Redding could say that she came to her opinions honestly, but this does not change the fact that they are not Christian opinions. As C. S. Lewis said about drifting Anglican clergy, “We never doubted that the unorthodox opinions were honestly held: what we complain of is your continuing your ministry after you have come to hold them.”<sup>29</sup> The problem is that the office of Christian minister does not authorize clergy to act as representatives of other religions.

More generally, there is a tendency in western churches to turn second things into first things.<sup>30</sup> That is, something downstream of the Gospel is made more important than the Gospel. We see this in

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<sup>28</sup> Ann Holmes Redding, “I am both Muslim and Christian,” *The Seattle Times* (June 17, 2007.) <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/i-am-both-muslim-and-christian/>.

<sup>29</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Christian Apologetics,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 87.

<sup>30</sup> C. S. Lewis, “First and Second Things,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, 307–11.

both politically left-leaning and politically right-leaning churches. On the political left of the church, there is a tendency to make the main focus of preaching “social justice” issues. While the Bible does promote social justice (Jer. 22:3; Mic. 6:8), excessive or exclusive focus on this topic risks obscuring the fact that Jesus did not come into this world to save cultures, but to save people. The danger is that the “social gospel” of reforming a world that is passing away supplants the true Gospel of eternal salvation from sin. On the political right of the church, there is a tendency to adopt secular business models of marketing and customer service in the hopes that we can grow the church by making a broader appeal. Yet if what we are marketing is not the Gospel but something we judge to be more attractive to the world’s itching ears, this is not faithful to Christ’s command. And we may also fall into the false belief that some human technique has the power to save. Although we are called to plant and water the seed of the Gospel, it is “only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:7).

What then should pastors be doing? They should of course preach the Gospel that we first received, rightly administer the sacraments, and they should teach everything that Christ commanded. That teaching should include thorough grounding in God’s word, a strong emphasis on life-long catechesis, and guidance in how to respond to the world’s many challenges. Clear articulation of the faith and its implications combined with effective Christian apologetics are also essential. We should always be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks [us] for a reason for the hope that is in” us (1 Pt. 3:15). The goal of apologetics is not to save, since this is the work of the Holy Spirit. Rather apologetics serves as pre-evangelism (*praeparatio evangelica*) and post-evangelism. As pre-evangelism, apologetics removes obstacles and destroys “strongholds” of resistance to God and the arguments and opinions “raised against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor. 10:4–5), doing the work of the law to prepare the soil for the planting of the Gospel. As post-evangelism, apologetics supports greater understanding of our faith (*fides quaerens intellectum*). Good pastors see their goal as one of developing effective ambassadors of Christ that take the Gospel into every walk of life. There, in their many vocations, Christians serve as preserving salt that upholds civilized society, and as beacons of light sharing God’s saving message.



## Conclusion

If we see God's Two Kingdoms as two modes of His providence and love, we are drawn back to His intentions for human beings in both the temporal world and eternity. In both spheres, the calling of Christians is to be faithful to the orders and offices that God has instituted, working to preserve order in the civil realm and to share the one Gospel entrusted to us. But in this life these orders and offices are the sites of constant battle between God and Satan. Everywhere, inside and outside the church, there are temptations to abdicate, subvert, or usurp offices. We must constantly examine whether office holders are walking away from assigned duties, using their office as a pretext to pursue private interests, or attempting to take a position that God has reserved for himself. While we must respect authority and all the offices God has instituted, we should hold office holders accountable for their use of office. No human beings, inside or outside the church, are authorized to tyrannize those under their care or to claim ultimate lordship of their conscience. An important task of Lutheran social ethics, therefore, is the clear delineation of vocational boundaries, so that office holders clearly understand what they are, and are not, authorized to do.

Of course, we know that on account of sin, vocational failure is inevitable. Therefore, we must return in faith to the God who can work all things to good (Rom. 8:28), even through our sinful actions. God is at work in us, in all of our vocations, serving, caring and providing for both our temporal and our eternal needs. A realistic Lutheran social ethic recognizes that our call is simply to do the best we can, where God has placed us, with the gifts God has given us, for the neighbors God has entrusted into our care. We serve God by our faith, and our neighbor through those acts of love that He works through us despite our sinful resistance. Ultimately, it is comforting that God's will is not thwarted by our weakness and defection, and our meager efforts, though they do not save, can be used by God to accomplish His good purposes.





# Lutheran Ecoethics

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**A**FTER HEARING THAT THE TOPIC OF THIS TALK was Lutheran Eco-ethics my son wondered why I was giving a talk on the ethics of economics. It dawned on me then that I may have completely misunderstood my assignment. Eco-ethics could refer to either ecological ethics or economic ethics, and if ethical economics is the talk that you came to hear I beg your forgiveness, because I misunderstood the purpose of this talk completely. And now you are stuck listening for an hour to a talk on ecological ethics when what you had your heart set on was economic ethics. Oh well, it's too late to change now, so this is just going to have to be about ecological ethics. And, by the way, what does the term eco-ethics actually mean? Well, I am neither an ethicist nor an ecologist, I am actually a cell biologist. But I can read Wikipedia and Wikipedia quotes Konrad Ott who defines it as follows: "[E]nvironmental ethics is an established field of practical philosophy which reconstructs the essential types of argumentation that can be made for protecting natural entities and the sustainable use of natural resources."<sup>1</sup>

Definitions like that are the reason that I am not an ethicist nor a philosopher. But I have had for a long time a desire to break the cardinal academic rule: "Thou shalt not cite Wikipedia." Now that I've done it I'd like to thank you for indulging me and we'll move on and talk about

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<sup>1</sup> "Environmental Ethics." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental\\_ethics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental_ethics) (Accessed January 30, 2023).

the environmental movement. I called it the environmental movement because this talk will not involve heavy hitting philosophers, mostly because I have to have a dictionary in my lap when I read them. I have instead attempted to present the viewpoints of those in the forefront of the environmental movement, those who are most likely to be having an influence in society. What is it that the people we see on the news, who have chained themselves to a tree, really believe? How does their understanding of the world compare with the Christian world-view?

The modern environmental movement in the United States and Europe is a rather recent development and spawned long after the industrial revolution had already taken hold. In the United States it largely began in the late 1800s to early 1900s by the early conservationists such as Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell and preservationists such as John Muir in this country, as well as many others. These early pioneers of the conservation movement were responsible for the formation of the national parks system as well as the national forests and other land and water set asides in the U.S. This was done to protect and preserve areas of particular beauty in their natural state and assure sustainability of forest resources. But even as this was being done, industrial pollution in many cities was making the air and water toxic to plants, animals, and people during the early to middle 1900s. This led to a new movement that recognized the need to not simply set aside nature preserves but to ensure that all areas, including our cities, have clean water and air and land that is not toxic. This need was especially recognized after some major events like the Killer Fog in London in 1952,<sup>2</sup> and the Cuyahoga River fires of 1969 in Cleveland, OH. Events like these stimulated the formation of a movement that we collectively call the environmental movement. It is really this movement that we must be talking about when we talk about environmentalism and ecological ethics.

In my Biology 101 course, where I get to pretend I'm an ecologist for four weeks, we define the environment as a distinct area made up of living (biotic), non-living, and climatic factors. And how we treat the environment is, of course, the subject of eco-ethics. One might think that the field of environmental ethics could be easily divided into its different groups of adherents. In theory this is easy but in practice ideas have often been blended from one group to another even among

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<sup>2</sup> "Mystery Solved! Cause of London's 1952 'Killer Fog' Revealed." *LIVESCIENCE*. (December 9, 2016). Accessed September 23, 2023. <https://www.livescience.com/57157-mystery-of-london-killer-fog-solved.html>

Christians. In fact, often times it is non-Christian presuppositions that dominate the thinking of Christian authors.<sup>3</sup> Because this is so, we shall first look at the secular underpinnings that have influenced both secular and some Christian thinking about environmentalism. Philosophically, the field is fragmented so what follows is primarily a teasing apart of the two major views and is not meant to be exhaustive.

## Deep vs. Shallow Ecology

One of the main influencers of modern environmental ethics was the Norwegian environmentalist, Arne Naess. After reading the book *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, Naess, along with Americans, George Sessions, Gary Snyder, and others, helped to define an ecological ethic that he called “Deep Ecology.” It is difficult to find anyone more influential than Naess within the environmental movement. Though many scientists, ethicists, and philosophers have taken issue with the concepts espoused in “deep ecology” its influence remains almost unabated in that most environmental groups have incorporated at least some its principles into their own. And several of the more radical environmental groups espouse *in toto* the tenets of deep ecology. Naess developed this term in the 1970’s when he concluded that the “ecological crisis” would not be solved under what were then current environmental philosophies.<sup>4</sup> So what does deep ecology actually mean? Well let’s contrast it with the other influential category of ecological philosophy, that has alternatively been called “shallow ecology”. Andrew Brennan derogatorily describes the shallow ecology movement as follows: “The ‘shallow ecology movement,’ as Naess (1973) calls it, is the ‘fight against pollution and resource depletion,’ the central objective of which is the health and affluence of people in the developed countries.”<sup>5</sup>

Most shallow ecologists don’t refer to themselves as shallow ecologists and would insist that they not only want to help affluent countries deal with environmental problems, but they would want to help everyone. But the name stuck so we’ll use it. According to “shallow ecology,” our surroundings, and even our fellow living creatures have value primarily insofar as they are of use to humans. Accordingly, the animals, plants, and other living things around us have no intrinsic value. Their value lies

<sup>3</sup> R. Nash, “The Case against Radical Environmentalism,” *Christian Research Journal* (April 20, 2009, updated July 31, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> <https://environmentalstudiesblog.wordpress.com/tag/anthony-weston/>

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Brennan and Norva Y. S. Lo, “Environmental Ethics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N Zalta (Summer 2022). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/ethics-environmental/>

primarily in the fact that they are of use to people. So shallow ecology would be considered to have an *anthropocentric* ethic, where the value of a particular approach to environmental management is governed by its benefit to humans. Some government agencies that manage state owned land are in this category. Examples of a highly anthropocentric ethic may be found in practices today such as fisheries management, where lakes and streams are stocked with fish species that fishermen like to catch. Forestry lands and wildlife also tend to be managed according to anthropocentric criteria. There is a subset of this thinking, espoused by philosophers such as Anthony Weston, that rejects deep ecology but also rejects anthropocentrism and focuses primarily on policy and technology, as well as the actions taken by humanity in order to purposely become less anthropocentric.<sup>6</sup> Frankly, I don't know what this last group believes but let's call them knee deep ecologists.

Proponents of deep ecology, on the other hand, consider themselves to be *bio-centric* or *eco-centric*. Deep ecologists subscribe to the idea that "all of nature has intrinsic value, fully apart from humankind's use, needs, or desires." These two groups constitute the two ends of a continuum with a variety of positions between them. Most other camps hold to at least some of the principles laid out by these two and even the shallow ecologists generally espouse several of the principles of deep ecology.

There are other ways to categorize ecological thinkers. Ronald Nash divides the ecological groups into three main secular branches of radical environmentalism. They are the Greens, the deep ecologists, and the animal rights movement. In his classification system the term Greens refers to groups that are primarily political and while focusing intensely on the environment, generally are socialists.<sup>7</sup> They believe that only centralized government control is capable of creating and enforcing the laws that would cause society to live in a way that does not damage the environment. And they work to create those laws. But since this is primarily a political movement and not an ethical position (though the adherents certainly follow an ethic; their ethic however, will generally be contained in one of the other positions) we will not devote any more time to them.

Some of the more radical groups that are sometimes associated with ecology are the animal rights groups. They, like the deep ecologists,

<sup>6</sup> Kat Jivkovich, "Key Theories in Environmental Philosophy: Shallow vs Deep Ecology," *Retrospect* (October 30, 2021). <https://retrospectjournal.com/2021/10/30/key-theories-in-environmental-philosophy-shallow-vs-deep-ecology/>

<sup>7</sup> Nash, "The Case against Radical Environmentalism," 1

argue that animals have intrinsic value but go beyond that and argue that all sentient animals have the same value as adult humans.<sup>8</sup> Because their ideas generally focus on only one concept, animal rights, and not so much ecological ethics, we will touch on them only once in this talk and that only by way of an illustration.

Because much of the popular environmental movement has a decidedly deep ecological approach it would be helpful to investigate them a little more deeply. Naess proposed an eight-part platform that sets forth the principles of the Deep Ecology movement. This eight-part proposal is stated below.

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.
5. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes.<sup>9</sup>

Notice that some of these statements are ideas that any compassionate person might agree with.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, many other ecologists might subscribe to five or six of these statements and yet not consider themselves to be a deep ecologist at all. So then, what is it then that

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Singer, "Why Speciesism is Wrong: A Response to Kagan," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (February 2016), 31–5.

<sup>9</sup> Arne Naess, "The Deep Ecological Movement Some Philosophical Aspects," *Philosophical Inquiry* 8, no. 1–2 (1986): 10–31.

<sup>10</sup> Especially the first 3.

really makes one a deep ecologist? As I have come to understand it, deep ecology is more like a world view, a philosophy (often called an Ecosophy), by which individuals and their actions are constantly viewed from the perspective of their impact on nature. One writer notes that deep ecology is a philosophical activity, an inquiry, the goal of which is to develop an ecological consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

Deep ecology demands “an approach which encourages the abandoning of the conception that humans are superior to nature.”<sup>12</sup> This explains why so many environmental activists are deep ecologists.<sup>13</sup> “Ecology in this sense is not a reductionist undertaking, but a movement toward a more whole (or holistic) vision and understanding of world processes.” A deep ecologist might have a mystical view of nature, akin to some of the native American religions.<sup>13</sup> According to Naess, the term “life” in deep ecology as used in the eight points above is a “more comprehensive non-technical way also to refer to what biologists classify as ‘non-living’: rivers (watersheds), landscapes, ecosystems. For supporters of deep ecology, slogans such as ‘let the river live’ illustrate this broader usage so common in many other cultures.”<sup>14</sup>

So then, in practical usage Deep Ecology is a way of understanding the world, more akin to a religion. And as a religion it has much in common with pantheism or perhaps panentheism. This explains why some environmentalists have idealized animistic or pantheistic indigenous religions.<sup>15</sup> The fact that it is a world view with religious overtones explains why many deep ecologists tend to gravitate to the more radical environmental groups.<sup>16</sup>

So then, shallow ecology is considered to be more anthropocentric while deep ecology is considered to be a biocentric worldview. Shallow ecology is concerned more with practical methods to help the environment, while deep ecologists are concerned first with our attitude towards the environment and believe that this will then lead to better more permanent ways of helping our environment.

<sup>11</sup> Bill Devall, “The Deep Ecology Movement,” *Natural Resources Journal* 20 (April 1980): 299–322.

<sup>12</sup> Jivkovah, “Key Theories.”

<sup>13</sup> B. Taylor, “The Resacralization of Mother Earth in the History and Future of Earth First,” *Earth First* (Nov.–Dec. 2005), 46–7.

<sup>14</sup> Naess, “Deep Ecological Movement,” 14

<sup>15</sup> <sup>15</sup> Taylor, “Resacralization,” 46.

<sup>16</sup> Horacio R. Trujillo, Brian A. Jackson, John C. Baker, Kim Cragin, John Parachini, and Peter Chalk, “The Radical Environmentalist Movement,” in *Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 2: Case Studies of Organizational Learning in Five Terrorist Groups* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2005), 147.

What Naess did that was most unique was to imbue his statements with the idea that humankind was not above the rest of creation. Because humans are part of rather than above the rest of nature, it stands to reason that they have no right to overrun the world's ecosystems or bend them for their own purposes at the expense of the rest of the organisms living there.

Aside from the worldview aspect of Deep Ecology, the practical difference between it and shallow ecology in terms of ecological praxis seems to me to be a bit nebulous. That might be because someone doesn't have to think that nature is sacred to want to save an elephant.

Naess' movement rapidly gained adherents throughout the 1980's but soon philosophers began to take Deep Ecology to task for its incoherent philosophical structure, and its lack of a "coherent critique of industrial society."<sup>17</sup> Deep ecology has also been criticized for the fact that it is just plain hard to argue, at least from an atheistic or agnostic perspective, that all of nature has intrinsic value. After all, what is the intrinsic value of a single piece of gravel? By the early twenty-first century the view that all of nature has intrinsic value had been taken to task by philosophers such to such an extent that by 2007 it could be said, "Nonetheless, the criticisms seem to have been fairly well received among environmental ethicists, and I suspect that those interested in or willing to defend claims about the intrinsic value of nature are rapidly declining in number."<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, for purely practical reasons it is difficult to defend the intrinsic value of all of nature. If every animal in nature is intrinsically valuable, then what are we to do when there are competing interests? For example, predation by endangered peregrine falcons may threaten recovery of the also endangered California least terns.<sup>19</sup> Are some more valuable than others? How can we choose?

So deep ecology has had plenty of critics even within the environmental movement. And while the deeply ecological consciousness that the deep ecologists had hoped for has declined among those higher brow philosophers and scientists, their ideas have grown among the rank and file who inhabit the influential environmental organizations such as Earth First, Greenpeace, as well as others. This is evident in

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<sup>17</sup> Bill Devall, "Deep Ecology and its Critics," *Trumpeter* 5, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 55–60.

<sup>18</sup> K. McShane, "Why Environmental Ethics Shouldn't Give Up on Intrinsic Value," *Environmental Ethics* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 43–61.

<sup>19</sup> Lynn A. Maguire and James Justus, "Why Intrinsic Value Is a Poor Basis for Conservation Decisions," *Bioscience Magazine* 58, no. 10 (November 2008): 910.



the continued call to reduce the human population that we hear time and again from those in various organizations, some of which are not considered radical. I suppose that the reason the shallow ecologists have not had so much criticism (except from the deeper ecologists) is due to its more pragmatic and less philosophical approach.

Though the deep and shallow ecologists are philosophically opposed, yet in real life conservation practices, as was mentioned before, they often are not far apart.<sup>20</sup> Today it seems that the majority in academia are the anthropocentrists, while in the environmental movement it is the deep ecologists that seem to wield the most influence. In popular ecology these movements have been seen as primarily secular movements but their messages have long had religious implications. P. J. Hill *et al.* suggests that the secular messages about the environment have religious overtones.<sup>21</sup> He notes that some environmentalists see themselves as prophets, “preaching a message of secular salvation.” He is correct when he says that “even the language of many environmental appeals is couched in terms that are clearly reminiscent of salvation, defeating evil and returning to a paradise similar to the Garden of Eden.”<sup>22</sup>

### A Short Digression

In order to contrast the preceding secular views of the environment from that of the Christian perspective we must recognize that the secular environmental movement, deep, shallow and everything in between, is built upon the assumption that there have been millions of years of evolutionary history wherein all living creatures have descended from a common ancestor. According to this view, it is natural selection with its selective forces that have shaped the various creatures over these years to occupy their various habitats and niches rather than having been specially created for their ecological roles by their Creator. This understanding has infiltrated the ecology departments of most universities to such an extent that what used to be called ecology departments are now most often named departments of ecology and evolution.

Within this materialistic framework, death is natural. In fact, it is death that allows natural selection to work as those creatures that are less fit are removed to make room for those that are more fit. Competition

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<sup>20</sup> M. L. Hunter, K. H. Redford, and D. B. Lindenmayer, “The Complementary Niches of Anthropocentric and Biocentric Conservationists,” *Conservation Biology* 28 (2014): 641–5.

<sup>21</sup> P. J. Hill, “Environmental Theology: A Judeo-Christian Defense,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Hill, “Environmental Theology.”

and its attendant suffering is natural according to this perspective. This leads to a contradiction, in my opinion, most especially for deep ecologists. Evolutionary theory would suggest that humans as a species should own their role in out-competing other organisms, at least to some degree. We shape the environment to our own tastes and any creatures that go extinct as a result are simply the product of natural selection working its will. Their arguments that we should have a minimal footprint on ecosystems leads to the question, "Why?" If the answer is because without a healthy bio-diversity humans too may suffer and die out, then they have become anthropocentric after all. If their answer is because ecosystems are interdependent, then if evolution is true other organisms will evolve to fill the niches that go unfilled because of human activity. Most would argue that this is true but that we are destroying ecosystems faster than evolution can evolve new species. But if evolution is true, what difference does it make? In an evolutionary worldview how can anything have any intrinsic value? If evolution is true, any answer that defends the intrinsic value of any species is without merit. After all, if evolution occurs by accidental chance mutations, how can we know that the accident has produced anything that has value?

### **Biblical Principles: 9.5 Theses**

If deep, shallow, and everything in between are the positions of secular ecologists, what stands out about a Lutheran eco-ethic is that it is first of all a Biblical ethic. What this means is that before asking what science has to say, as Christians we must take seriously what the Bible has to say about God's world and our place in it. Any conclusion that would militate against Biblical principles is automatically excluded. For example, the animal rights position that we must not eat animals is excluded for us by the fact that God said to Noah after the flood: "Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything" (Gen. 9:3, NIV).

This is not to say that science has nothing to say about the relationships of created organisms to other organisms and to their surroundings. Scientists have learned a lot about best practices for management of lands and waters. But for the Christian, while the input of scientists is informative and helpful, it must remain secondary. Before we ask how best to treat a particular ecosystem we must first ask what does God say to us about our role in any ecosystem.

In keeping with the idea that these are the Reformation Lectures, I would like to put forward not 95 theses, that would be too long, but 9.5

theses that I believe are supportable with Holy Scripture. Number one is this:

**Thesis #1: This world is God's first of all, and therefore our attitude is chiefly theocentric,** not eco-centric. To have a primarily eco-centric worldview is to make an idol of nature. This means by default that we reject the idea that a naturalistic process of evolution has created humans and all of life. Evolution as a major creative force is a figment of scientist's imagination. Genesis 1 informs us that God created this world and the living things in it by the Word of His mouth. "Then God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind'; and it was so" (Gen. 1:24, LSB).

The twenty-four elders in Revelation 4 praise God in saying: "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created" (4:11, ESV). This is simply stating the truth that is spelled out for us in more detail in Genesis 1, that God has created all creation. Psalm 24:1 puts it succinctly, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (ESV).

The Bible makes clear that the creation is distinct from God and is dependent upon God, in contrast to any form of pantheism. Speaking of God the Son, Hebrews 1:3 proclaims that, "He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power" (NASB).

This denies that the world is in some way self-sustaining and would rule out various forms of the "Gaia hypothesis" in which nature is viewed as a sort of "huge living creature," an organism that in New Age thinking has itself been regarded as a god.<sup>23</sup> The correct Biblical understanding of one God as separate and distinct from His creation also rules out fertility gods or other gods of nature, so called "nature polytheism," that the nations surrounding the Old Testament nation of Israel worshipped, or the deified nature or even deified objects in nature, such as mountains or rivers that have been worshipped by some indigenous peoples. It is characteristic of spiritually lost people to look at the beauty of what God has made and worship the creature rather than the Creator. St. Paul says as much in Romans: "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen" (1:25, NIV).

<sup>23</sup> Chris Wright, "Theology and Ethics of the Land," *Transformation* 16, no. 3 (1999), 81–6.

Furthermore, the God who created this world is the Triune God Who is transcendent. He is “Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come” (Eph. 1:21, KJV). The Scriptures also indicate that “in Him we live and move and have our being” (Ac. 17:28, NKJV).

So, the Biblical God is transcendent, separate and above His creation, yet also immanent and with His creation.

**Theses #2: Nature does have intrinsic value and the Bible tells us why.**

Why? Because God created it and then after He created it He pronounced it good. That very fact bestows value upon creation. After all, does God waste His time or effort? Note that God pronounced the animals and plants good before He created Adam and Eve, lest we think that it is only people He found to be good. But perhaps He is simply calling creation good because it all suited the purposes of the human beings whom He will create after everything else is finished. Well, there are other hints that God values His creation apart from simply its utilitarian purpose for mankind.

God commanded Noah to take on board the ark a sampling of each of the land vertebrates. We don't consider porcupines or skunks or aardvarks as animals that are of great use to people and yet God instructs Noah to take these and all the other animals on the ark. This implies that they are of value at least to God, and He wanted to make sure that they stayed alive to fill their niches in the world that would come after the one that was flooded. Not only that but God cares for His animals as Psalm 104 makes clear where in verses 27–28 we read that: “All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things” (NIV). Then verse 31 says “Let the Lord be glad in His works” (NASB 1995).

If God rejoices in His works, then shouldn't we as His children also? Here's another reason to ascribe value to other beings. After the flood God makes His covenant with mankind but He also makes it with the animals. Listen to Genesis 9, “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth” (Gen. 9:9–10, NIV).

If God values these creatures should we not also value them? So the other creatures have intrinsic value because God imbues them with it, but then listen to what Jesus tells us in Matthew 6, because there is another reason that we should value them: “Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. ... And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?” (6:26, 28–30, NIV).

So look at what God has done, He has made these birds and flowers witnesses to people of His goodness and His providential care for us. There is therefore, also an anthropocentric role of the animals and plants, in that God shows us His goodness through them and also provides for our bodily nourishment by means of them. So the Biblical view of our ecosystems is first theocentric, but then we might also say that properly understood there is an anthropocentric understanding too. And finally, there is intrinsic value in nature after all.

### **Theses #3: We too are creatures.**

Francis Schaeffer, in his book *Pollution and the Death of Man*, brings out the importance of remembering that as all other living things are created beings, so are we.<sup>24</sup> The Commission for Theology and Church Relations document from the LCMS produced in 2010 entitled, *Together with All Creatures: Caring for God's Living Earth*<sup>25</sup> repeats this fact as do many Christian authors. I have wondered why so many writers want to repeat something that seems so self-evident. One reason is to curb the notion that we have absolute authority over the rest of creation. This seems like a far-fetched idea today but humanity always has its robber barons, who are willing to exploit not only their workers but also the environment. So this idea needs to be stated clearly. God created humankind from the stuff of earth and we receive our sustenance from it. It was Adam's desire to be more than a mere creature that led him to succumb to the devil's temptation. Because of this our humanity is now utterly marred by sin. The fall into sin has rendered man incapable of clearly knowing how he should interact with nature, with God, or

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<sup>24</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970), 31.

<sup>25</sup> CTCR, *Together with All Creatures: Caring for God's Living Earth* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 31.

mankind either, for that matter. Our inherent sinfulness with its associated lack of contentment has played a large role in mankind's mad grab for natural resources, regardless of the cost to the environment. Remembering that we are dust and to dust we shall return is important in helping us to remain in our place.

**Theses #4: We are creatures to whom God has given a unique position, a priority in His creation.**

"Know that the Lord, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture" (Ps. 100:3, ESV). "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1, ESV). In these passages as well as others, humans are, of course, included as part of God's creation so that if we were to stop here it might seem that some ecologists are right. We are simply one part of a large creation and as such we have no right to think that we are special in any way. However, these passages are not the only Word that God speaks about the place of humanity in His creation. While the Bible ascribes to humans a place alongside other creatures, it also ascribes to humans a unique place above all of the other creatures. About no other creatures and to no other creatures does God speak as He does in Genesis 1,

"Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (1:26–28, NKJV).

Luther writes about this passage:

"But here Moses points out an outstanding difference between these living beings and man when he says that man was created by the special plan and providence of God. This indicates that man is a creature far superior to the rest of the living beings that live a physical life." He goes on to say: "the Holy Spirit dignifies the nature of man in such a glorious manner and distinguishes it from all other creatures. His physical or animal life was, indeed, to be similar to that of the beasts. Just as the beasts have need of food, drink, and

rest to refresh their bodies, so Adam, even in his innocence, would make use of them. But what is added that man was created for his physical life in such a way that he was nevertheless made according to the image and likeness of God—this is an indication of another and better life than the physical.”<sup>26</sup>

God has given humans a special place among the creatures by virtue of their having been created in His image and also because God uniquely, among all animals, pre-adapted humans to live in this special relationship with Him.<sup>26</sup> The psalmist said, “Yet Thou hast made him a little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor” (Ps. 8:5, RSV).

**Theses #5: As part of their special elevated place in creation, God gives humans a special role to play.**

Lutherans have generally referred to this role as that of steward over the rest of His earthly creation. Their role includes the command to subdue it and have dominion [Hebrew רדה] over every living thing that moves on the earth. This Hebrew word can have several nuances depending upon the context. It can mean to tread down, to subjugate or, as in most places where it occurs, simply to rule or exercise dominion. The LCMS CTCR document from 2010 stresses that רדה means, among other things, the gracious rule of a shepherd king.<sup>27</sup>

This command in Genesis is foundational for a Biblical understanding of humanity’s place in the ecosystem. “[F]ill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Gen. 1:28, NIV).

In this command God has clearly placed humans in a position to make decisions that govern the well-being of all the other creatures. It is this passage of Scripture, according to some environmentalists, that has been one of the main drivers of the “ecological crisis” that we have found ourselves in since the industrial revolution.

One of the first scientists to argue this publicly was Lynn White Jr. in his 1967 article in the prestigious journal *Science* entitled “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis.” White argues that even though much of the world is not Christian, the advancements in technology and industry that are destroying ecosystems all across the world

<sup>26</sup> CTCR, *Together with All Creatures*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> CTCR, *Together with All Creatures*, 31.



emanate from the Christian, Latin, western worldview.<sup>28</sup> The problem, according to White, is that Christians as well as non-Christians have taken God's exhortation in Genesis 1 too seriously and have exercised dominion as if we were not part of creation and, as a result, driven species to extinction and destroyed entire ecosystems in the process of ruling over creation. I would like to briefly address this idea that Christianity is to blame for the majority of the environmental destruction in the world.

No doubt there have been some Christians who have misunderstood this passage as a license to plunder nature. Paul Boehlke from the Wisconsin Synod notes that a form of Gnostic thinking with its de-emphasis of the physical and elevation of the spiritual may have caused some Christians to misuse the environment.<sup>29</sup> But to lay the entire blame for any and all environmental problems at the foot of Christians ignores the fact that ecosystem destruction is a world-wide phenomenon. The aborigines in Australia, long before the industrial revolution and long before Christianity came to that continent, had been changing the environment there, even driving some species to extinction.<sup>30</sup> The Maori people settled New Zealand and drove the Moa Bird extinct within a few generations, long before Christians came to New Zealand.

Furthermore, pollution is not a by-product of the western world alone. A simple look at a couple of headlines puts that idea to rest. "Asia's plastic problem is choking the world's oceans. Here's how to fix it."<sup>31</sup> "Air Pollution, Africa's invisible silent killer."<sup>32</sup>

In spite of the fact that God knew how we would treat His world, He still made mankind His stewards and He hasn't yet rescinded that command.

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<sup>28</sup> Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–7.

<sup>29</sup> P. Boehlke, "Speaking for the Earth," *The Lutheran Educator* 48 (December 2007), 38–43.

<sup>30</sup> T. Farah, "Are humans a cancer on the planet? A physician argues that civilization is truly carcinogenic," *Salon* (August 5, 2023). <https://www.salon.com/2023/08/05/are-humans-a-cancer-on-the-planet-a-physician-argues-that-civilization-is-truly-carcinogenic> (Accessed August 15, 2023).

<sup>31</sup> J. Wood, "Asia's plastic problem is choking the world's oceans. Here's how to fix it," *World Economic Forum* (September 18, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> M. Atani, "Air Pollution: Africa's Invisible, Silent Killer," *United Nations Environment Programme* (October 20, 2023). <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/air-pollution-africas-invisible-silent-killer-1> (Accessed August 15, 2023).



**Theses #6: Humans are God's stewards over creation, but they are imperfect and sinful stewards.**

To blame a Christian worldview for the worldwide damage to ecosystems is simplistic. While we in the west have caused our share of the world's environmental problems, it is not the western world that is right now grossly overfishing the oceans or killing off the elephants. So to put the blame exclusively on Christianity or even the Western world as a whole is to miss the mark. This is a human issue. Wherever humans live they leave their mark on the ecological landscape. Wherever humans live sin too, with its lack of compassion, its greed, and lack of contentment, will exist.

However, while we may defend the West from accusations of being the *entire* problem, we wouldn't want to pretend that Christians don't shoulder some blame. Christians are both saints and sinners and we too have participated in the destruction of God's creation. Lynn White's criticism of Christian eco-ethics may be overstated, but often even in wrong-headed criticism there is often a core of truth. Such is the case with his assessment of Christians' treatment of the environment. And, lest we get the idea that God made the world and then gave it to human beings such that He no longer claims ownership, we should go back to Thesis #1 and Psalm 24. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps. 24:1, ESV).

Responding to Lynn White's criticism in his 1970 book *Pollution and the Death of Man*, Francis Schaeffer takes Christians to task for not having had a consistent theology of the environment. He notes, like Boehlke, that some have taken a sort of platonic view that the "material world" isn't important because it is the "spirit" that is of value. Therefore, polluting our environment isn't of great consequence. After all, the Bible says that this world is passing away. It is precisely the fact that some Christians have held to this view of the environment that prompted Lynn White and other scholars to condemn Christianity's response to environmental problems. Schaeffer takes seriously the command that God gave to mankind in Genesis, to take dominion, but holds it with the understanding that humans are to be kindly stewards of this world.

Schaeffer notes that although God has elevated humans above the rest of creation, it does not follow that we should devalue the rest of creation. Indeed, the fact that God had an interest in creating it means that nature deserves respect. "It deserves this respect as something which was created by God, as man himself has been created by God."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, ????. (originally fn 34)

Schaeffer goes on to say that the church should show its love for God by loving the creation He made and this entails proper conservation practices and restoration of beauty to our properties.

The real problem with major ecosystem destruction is not Christianity but sin. It is really greed and often laziness that leads to ecosystem destruction and extinctions. The passenger pigeon, with flocks so dense that they could block out the sunlight, were hunted to extinction around the turn of the last century. Hunters were paid to hunt them and the birds were shipped by train to eastern cities. Finally, in 1896, despite the fact that there was only one large flock left, 250,000 were killed in a single day and within four years all wild passenger pigeons were gone. Animals like the American Bison were hunted almost to extinction for monetary gain as well as to hamstringing the Native American populations that depended upon them. It is greed or convenience that leads companies to dump toxic waste into rivers or wells rather than lower their profits with cleanup costs. It is laziness that leads people to throw their trash onto the landscape or into the waterways.

**Theses #7: Stewards are given authority to make decisions.**

The command to exercise dominion over the earth is a real command. God has given humans the role to be stewards over the earth around them. Every time a farmer sprays pesticides or a gardener pulls weeds or a homeowner mows the lawn, dominion over nature is being exercised. As people have taken authority over nature the production of food has increased to a level that was unimaginable even 100 years ago. The natural course of events is being altered all over the world because people exercise their dominion over nature. The same is true when a dam or a subdivision is built, or when a forest is cut and another one planted. This stewardship, however, is a double-edged sword. Decisions can be made to destroy ecosystems or to ensure their survival. The LCMS document *Together with All Creatures* notes that:

[W]e have come to define ourselves as consumers, and that much of our consumption is geared toward enjoyment rather than survival. Further, the amount we consume impacts the wider creation. The size of the average American home has doubled since 1970 even as the number living in that home has been halved.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> CTCR, *Together with All Creatures*, 88.

We must hold humankind's elevated status in tension with the fact that nature has value of its own and ought not be destroyed without good reason. Christians have a role to play in being witnesses to the world that contentment and real joy are not to be found in the latest electronic gizmo or most luxurious automobile. But it is to be found in our relationship with our Savior and the people He brings into our lives.

**Theses #8: We are our brother's ecosystem's keeper.**

The second table of the law commands us to love our brother. Near the conclusion of his explanation to the seventh commandment in the Large Catechism Luther says:

Enough has been said about what stealing is. It should not be narrowly restricted, but it should pertain to anything that has to do with our neighbor. We will sum it up, as we have done in the previous commandments: First, we are forbidden to do our neighbors any injury or wrong in any way imaginable, whether by damaging, withholding, or interfering with their possessions and property. We are not even to consent to or permit such a thing but are rather to advert and prevent it.<sup>35</sup>

This has great application in regards to environmental destruction in at least two ways. The first is that I should not take away my neighbor's proper use of his property by polluting it or destroying it in other ways. For example, I should not pollute the stream that runs across my property that then runs across my neighbor's property. The second is that I must conserve the resources that I am able to save for those who will come after me. This requires frugality. One might ask if those of us who are largely capitalists and for whom freedom means a great deal (of whom I count myself) have too often erred on the side of freedom without thinking of environmental costs to my neighbor.

With this in mind I would like to suggest that Christians should strive to be environmentalists. Not the strident, over-reaching environmentalist that superglue themselves to the runway so that airport traffic screeches to a halt. But people who are genuinely concerned for our neighbor and his or her property.

**Theses #9: Humans are not all that is fallen. The whole world groans.**

The earth as we know it today is not the same as it was when God pronounced it good. Because of Adam's fall into sin the creation

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<sup>35</sup> LC Ten Commandments 250.

according to Romans 8:22 has been subjected to futility. “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (NIV).

One consequence of this is that suffering has entered the ecosphere. The genomes of animals and plants have been decaying in the years since the fall just as the human genome has been decaying. Species sometimes go extinct apart from any human activity. In a fallen world there are generally no perfect solutions to problems. No utopia will exist in this world until God remakes it.

There is a tendency for people to think that humans have greater control over the environment than we actually do. This is not to say that humans are unable to exercise a great deal of control over land and water use, but if a large volcanic eruption occurs tomorrow and a huge amount of volcanic ash is spewed into the stratosphere, it will likely affect ecosystems across the globe for the next few years and we are helpless to change the outcome. This doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t work at remediating environmental pollution or work on ways to prevent habitat degradation. We of all people should take these matters seriously. But this is a reminder that no matter what we do we still live in a fallen world to which the only real answer is that answer supplied by grace. No matter how much environmentalism we practice, nature will continue to groan and deteriorate until Jesus returns. To put our faith in various ecological movements will likely prove to be a disappointment. But God in His grace really does have a new heaven and a new earth for us and the deterioration around us is to make us hunger for our new home.

### **Thesis #9.5: We are motivated by the Gospel.**

The motivation of many environmental groups seems to be fear (or in some cases the love of donations). There is fear of extinction of animals and plants, fear of invasive organisms, fear of catastrophic climate change, fear of a world that is unfit to live in. Whether these fears have a rational basis or not, it is an unhealthy way to live. A new group of words has come into our vocabulary in recent years. Eco-anxiety is “a term that refers to persistent worries about the future of Earth and the life it shelters. Related terms — ‘climate change distress,’ ‘eco-trauma,’ ‘eco-angst,’ and ‘ecological grief,’ to name a few — acknowledge that this concern often involves symptoms beyond those of anxiety alone.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> C. Raypole, “Climate Change Taking a Toll on Your Mental Health? How to Cope With ‘Eco-Anxiety,’” *Healthline.com* (September 23, 2020). <https://www.healthline.com/health/eco-anxiety> (Accessed September 16, 2023).

Our fear of God is something quite different from the paralyzing foreboding that people experience as eco-anxiety, for God is not only our God, He is our gracious Father and He has given us reason to trust His care and concern for us in this world. We have, after all, two great reasons to love our Creator. The first is because He created us and set us within a world that even in its fallen state is still wondrous and marvelous. And the second and more important is because He has redeemed us not with gold or silver but with the precious blood of His Own dear Son such that we have an eternal home in the new heaven and earth.

This term “dear” appears seventeen times in in Luther’s Large Catechism. Of those, fourteen occur when he speaks of the relationship between God and His children. He speaks either of our “dear Heavenly Father” or of the Father’s “dear children,” or “child.” And this endeared relationship, brought about solely by His grace, is what prompts our actions in obeying His law. It likewise should govern my behavior towards the environment that I am in. If God so loves me that He not only gave me His Son, but He also gave me birds to watch that remind me of His care and flowers to tell me that He will provide for me, why would I be afraid? Jesus tells us in Matthew 6 to observe these things for they are witnesses to us.

If God has given me these gifts and a thousand more in the natural world around me, if He also gives me sacraments, made from the stuff of this world, and His Word, and if He really is my “dear Father” by grace, why would I want to degrade His creation? Wouldn’t I want to take care of my Father’s world rather than destroy it? This heart of gratitude is at the heart of the Christian life and it is also at the heart of a Lutheran eco-ethic. Paul Boehlke notes that, “If we love the Maker as we are commanded to do in the first table of the law, we will respect what He has made. To trash the environment, insults the Designer.”<sup>37</sup>

## Finally, some applications

**Sustainability** is not a four-letter word. In fact, God’s Old Testament instructions to Israel had sustainability written all over it. God gave Israel laws against cutting down trees when conquering an enemy or governing the planting of their fields (leaving land fallow every seventh year). Just because radical environmental groups call for sustainability doesn’t mean we can’t too. In fact, we should.

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<sup>37</sup> Boehlke, “Speaking for the Earth,” 40.

**There are limits to the world's resources** and we do well to find ways to make them last for those who will come after us. They too are our neighbor. We should strive to use best practices that preserve soil and keep water clean and try to limit wastefulness. After feeding the 5,000, Jesus said, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted" (Jn. 6:12, NIV).

Our teaching on vocation holds that God acts through you and me to bless our neighbors. One way to do this is by rightly using natural resources such that our neighbor is helped by what we have grown or produced and not harmed by our by-products or carelessness. If caring for my neighbor in this way reduces my profit margin then so be it, my heavenly Father will take care of my needs.

**When decisions must be made between other species and human well-being, humans, who have been made in God's image, must of course take priority.** Much human suffering, hunger, pain and disease has been alleviated as standards of living have risen around the world. A lot of this is because humans have taken dominion over creation. How this high standard of living has itself become an idol is a topic to be debated, but when a genuine conflict arises between how to benefit nature or mankind we side with mankind first as we also look for possible compromises. We will want to elevate the standard of living of people in places where they have difficult lives and short lifespans. This may indeed require compromises from those who are more ecologically minded.

**In a fallen world some decisions are not easily made.** There are often no clear ways forward that will not cause some harm. It is a world of tradeoffs. Robert Benne gets at this in his cogent article entitled, "Am I Righteous or What? I Drive a Honda Civic That Gets 40 MPG!"<sup>38</sup>

**Do not be anxious, God's promise to Noah still stands.** "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night, shall not cease" (Gen. 8:21, ESV). When the winds and waves are roaring and people's hearts are failing them for fear, look up, for your redemption draws near.

**Being a nuisance just makes people mad. Don't protest in the middle of the highway at rush hour.** Instead, "Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand" (Phil. 4:5, KJV).

**Finally, godliness with contentment is great gain.** LSQ

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Benne, "Am I Righteous or What? I Drive a Honda Civic That Gets 40 MPG!," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 3, no. 2 (February 2003).



# Christmas Day, the Nativity of our Lord

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## Nothing can ruin Christmas, nothing! John 1:1–14

**Text:** *“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 nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe on His name; who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:1–14, NKJV).*

**T**HE WORLD IS FALLING APART. THERE ARE WARS in more places than Ukraine and Israel. Our own borders are not secure, and there seems to be no end of the chaos in sight. Home prices are high, mortgage rates too. If you are renting, there is no relief there. And a blue tarp is no answer. Inflation has done no



good to our family budget. Crime is an ever-present menace. Civility and neighborliness, once strengths of our country, seem to have almost disappeared. The mood of the country is gloomy. For many, friends and family members have died this year. And sickness, serious sickness, afflicts so many. Trouble and sadness have probably touched your family this past year. It may seem to you that Christmas doesn't shine as brightly as in the past.

But it does! The birth of Christ shines more brightly in dark, troubled times. For it brings Life, and that Life is the Light of men. It shines forth from the One who was given to all and to each, given from heaven where sadness is no more, and joy and peace are unending. He was given in dark, troubled times to bring heaven's joy and peace to you and so lift your heart to heaven, where you, He promises, will dwell forever with Him.

So, let us rise and sing, shout and proclaim: Nothing can ruin Christmas. Nothing!

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the eternal Word made man this day. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

When you read John's Gospel there is no Christmas story, no angels, no shepherds, no swaddling cloths, no manger. John left that to Luke. There is no star in the east, no wise men, no gold, frankincense, or myrrh, no flight to Egypt. John left that to Matthew. John simply shows us who know Christ that **Nothing can ruin Christmas, nothing!**

I. Matthew anchors the Christmas story deep in the soil of the Promised Land, Israel. He paints a picture of Jesus as the seed of Abraham and the son of David, a carpenter's son from Nazareth who was declared by John the Baptist to be the very Messiah, the lawful successor to David's throne, a Hebrew/Israelite/Jew (for the terms are not synonymous) who saves the world by His suffering and dying, and then rising again from death.

Luke anchors the Christmas story in the history not just of Israel, but of the world. Luke pictures Jesus not so much as the seed of Abraham, the son of David, but the son of Adam, the first man. Jesus was born in Bethlehem when Caesar Augustus was emperor, Quirinius governing Syria, and the whole Roman world undergoing a tax census. Luke doesn't accent the Jewishness of Jesus, but His all-encompassing humanity. Jesus is the second Adam, the new head of humanity, who embraces all with His life, death, and resurrection. He is the One who

draws close to tax collectors and sinners, women, lepers, Samaritans, and even Gentiles, in other words, to those the religious of His day had no use or respect for.

John speaks to his audience as those who already know the important details of the birth of Jesus. But if you don't know those details, you must consult Matthew and Luke. He also assumes that you know what Jesus did in the course of His ministry, and what He said. Again, if you don't, you must consult Matthew and Luke, or if you're in a hurry, the Reader's Digest version that is Mark. But simply knowing what Jesus did and said does not tell you all that you need to know about Jesus, about who He is, and was, and will be, forever. That's John's burden. He knew that one could recite all the facts about Jesus and still not understand who He is. That's why John has no nativity, no baptism by John, no parables, no institution of the Lord's Supper. He tells us about only seven selected miracles. But John does have all those "I am" sayings of Jesus, including the stunning, "Before Abraham was, I am" (Jn. 8:59). For they tell us who Jesus is.

When John put pen to paper, it almost sounds as though he were trying to rewrite the Bible, starting with Genesis. He was rewriting the Torah of Moses in terms of Jesus. In fact, John employed many images of Moses and pressed them into use. From them he took the idea that the Torah was the divine Word, that it was in the beginning with God. John borrowed from the Greeks of his day who said that the "Logos," or divine spark, was the light and life of all people. John bundled these two together, Torah and Logos, and wrapped them up in the flesh and blood of Jesus with this theologically loaded passage: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." With that one sentence, John closes the distance between Jew and Greek. The eternal Word, the Torah of the Jews, the Logos of the Greeks, the ordering Principle of the universe, the Second Person of the Undivided Trinity, became flesh, born of a human mother, and dwelt among us in the fullness of God's glory.

And it's not as though He hadn't been with us before He dwelt among us. John is quite clear on that point too. Jesus is the eternal Word, who was with God in the beginning, and is Himself God. Through Him all things were made. He is the Light of the world, the first Word spoken to the darkness of creation on day one. In Him is life. All living things have their life in Him. He is the Word that called forth all plants from the ground, put fish in the sea, birds in the air, critters

on the ground. He made man from the earth and breathed life into him. There is nothing in all creation that doesn't owe its existence to the Word—not you, not me. And so there never was a time when the Word wasn't in us and over us. But now, John says, He is with us.

And so, the Word who has been over creation since the creation, the Light and Life of all, who appeared in various times and manners to the fathers of the Old Testament, now in these last days, as the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, has taken up residence in the tent of our humanity to dwell among us as one of us. That is what John is saying.

**II.** Let your mind dwell on that for a moment. John is saying that the baby Luke told us about, the One lying in a manger, drooling, soiling his diapers, nursing at his mother's breast, burping, doing all the terribly human things babies do, is God of God, Light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things are made. That is what John is saying.

The eternal Word has fingers and toes, a nose and eyes. He is just like us, but without the interference of sin, without our inborn blindness to the light of eternity, without our deafness to God's plain, clear will, without our self-centeredness. He's like us, as God intended for us to be. He is our humanity re-created in God's image. In Him is life, our life. We are re-conceived in Him. We are re-born in Him. Humanity itself is re-born in Christ, the second Adam. You see, we are not simply celebrating the birth of Jesus at Christmas. We are celebrating the re-birth of humanity itself in Jesus of Nazareth.

Mary could barely hold this in her heart as she pondered. The shepherds were amazed. Theologians through the centuries have struggled with it, church councils have argued over it, denominations have fought and divided over it. Even you yourself may be filled with questions. How can this be? How can God be man and not cease to be God? How can man be God and not cease to be man? How can the infinite Word become flesh? How can the fullness of God dwell bodily in Jesus?

But what John says reminds us that you don't have to understand a person to relate to him. I don't always understand my wife, and she certainly doesn't always understand me. You don't need to explain how the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us any more than you need to explain how water can be a baptism of the Holy Spirit or bread and wine can be the body and blood of Christ. You need only take the Word at His word and enjoy His company. The darkness need not understand light to receive it. It just needs to be darkness. Darkness

can't resist light or overcome it. Light will always fill the emptiness of the darkness, as it did on the first day of the creation.

The dead don't need to understand life to receive it; they need only be dead. Life always fills the emptiness of death. We who sit in the darkness, in the shadow of death, need only trust that the Light that gives light to all shines on us in Jesus Christ. Our unbelief doesn't keep Jesus from being Light, Life, and Salvation. He is that whether we believe it or not, just as He is the Word that created us and holds all things together, whether we believe it or not. Our unbelief can only get in the way of our enjoying His Light and Life, recognizing it for what it is, and resting in it.

The One who holds the universe together has shown us His face, told us His Name. The One whom the physicists seek and mathematicians calculate, the One whom the mystics ponder, the First Mover of the universe, the Light that lightens all people, the Life that gives life to all—you know who He is. John tells you. You may not understand Him, but you know who He is. He is Jesus. He is Mary's Son. He is God's Son in the flesh.

That's why angels sing, shepherds worship, and Mary ponders, even though she knows the facts about her Son better than anyone. She ponders, because there is so much here to ponder, even for those who know the facts. God and man are reconciled, brought together in the eternal Son. God dwells with man, pitches His tent in our humanity. As the carol says, "Veiled in flesh, the God-head see / Hail! Incarnate Deity / Pleased as man with men to dwell. Jesus, our Emmanuel" (ELH 125 v2).

The Word became flesh. How wonderful it is to be human today! How honored we are that the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us! His birth and life, His suffering and death, His burial and resurrection, His ascension to the right hand of the Father in our flesh and blood. Our Savior, our Brother, the Second Adam, stands once more in the presence of God interceding for us. So, you see, dear friends, **nothing can ruin Christmas, nothing.** Nothing can change what God has done. As Martin Luther once sang: "What harm can sin and death then do? / The true God now abides with you. / Let hell and Satan rage and chafe, / Christ is your Brother—ye are safe" (ELH 154 v4). And so, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Lk. 2:14, KJV). Merry Christmas to one and all. Amen.



# Week of the Baptism of Christ

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**Text:** *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him. (1 Peter 3:18–22 NKJV)*

**B**EFORE YOU FIRST STARTED SCHOOL, PROBABLY around age four or five, you already understood that you were a person, a human being. You had already learned how to distinguish yourself from a dog or a cat or a chair. More than likely no one taught you this but you simply recognized it, at least by the time you went off to kindergarten. This gradual indoctrination into realizing your “humanness” was probably not instantaneous one day, but slowly built over time. Now, of course, you were a human being prior to your understanding of it. The fact that you could not verbalize your “humanness” at age two did not prevent you from being an actual human. Your intellect finally caught up with your status so you could explain that you are a real person.

The day that I was born, due to medical complications, my parents immediately had me baptized into the Christian faith, which meant, according to Scripture, that by the work of the Holy Spirit I was transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. As God's Word teaches, this meant that by God's grace I was now *"clothed with Christ"* and His righteousness. I was given the *"gift of the Holy Spirit."* I was granted the *"forgiveness of sins."* My baptism was a *"washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit."* Along with the entire Christian church, I was now *"cleansed ... made holy through the washing with water through the Word."*

My intellect, however, did not come to grasp or understand this for a time. I was not able to verbalize this new, God-given status until I was probably four or five years old. However, prior to this—let's say at age two—my lack of ability to comprehend it or to verbalize it did not prevent me from being a Christian. Through time, I finally was able to understand and express what I had been since the day of my birth, because I had now been educated to know and appreciate that God had made me His child from day one of my life.

In the text before us, Peter writes that *"Baptism now saves us"* because it gives us *"the pledge"* (a guarantee, or contract) *of a good conscience toward God."* He instructs us that baptism is not merely an outward act like an external washing that removes dirt from your body, but it connects us to the saving work of Christ on the cross, due to the power of God's Word attached to it. This is why the Bible speaks of it having such amazing spiritual power. In order to emphasize his point, Peter uses the picture of the ark in Noah's day. Just as the ark was lifted by the water to save Noah's family, so Baptism also saves us, lifting us up away from eternal destruction through faith in Christ.

Many years ago a college student who claimed to have been a Christian her whole life informed me that she had never been baptized. In her words, she felt it was "unnecessary." When I inquired about it, she said her pastor never talked about it. He never encouraged her to be baptized, nor did her parents. It seemed to be an irrelevant ceremony. I said, "What about the nearly one hundred passages that deal with baptism in the Bible? What about the fact that Jesus Himself gives us the loving command to be baptized?" Her flippant attitude toward this Sacrament reminded me of Martin Luther's statement that we can be tempted to look at baptism "the way a cow stares at a barn door."


The problem with understanding Baptism is found in us, not in the clear words of Scripture. It is in us when we look at it through the lens of

logic, and not faith. Paul states, *“God chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things ... to nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before Him”* (1 Cor. 1:28–29, NIV). Understanding baptism rightly from the Bible takes away all boasting in ourselves. What an amazing thing is Baptism! May we never forget what it brings us.

Luther famously writes, “Suppose there were a physician who had so much skill that people would not die, or even though they died would afterward live eternally. Just think how the world would snow and rain money upon such a person! Because of the throng of rich people crowding around, no one else would be able to get near. Now, here in baptism there is brought, free of charge, to every person’s door just such a treasure and medicine that swallows up death and keeps all people alive.”<sup>1</sup>

I have known a few adult sons from loving families who have chosen to reject their parents and run away. By their own choosing they live as if they have disowned their mother and father and have no family. Yet, all this time, the parents continue to love their wayward son, desire to have him back, pray that he returns, and still consider him their own. The son’s rejection of his status as their child has not changed their intent or desire to love him. Their affection toward their son remains constant, despite his rejection.

If God has made you His child by your Baptism, you may be tempted to throw aside this wonderful status as a citizen of heaven, a child of light. You may be tempted by the darkness of the world to run away from God, disown Christ, and act as if you do not belong to Him. But that rebellious activity does not change the desire God has in His heart toward you. His resolve toward you is constant. Your rejection does not change the intent your gracious Savior has placed into your Baptism. Many have at times wandered away from the covenant God made with them in their Baptism, and then, later in life by God’s doing, realized what they once had and have returned to again cherish this gift. When faith is rekindled, and we return we do not need to be rebaptized because God’s covenant toward us still remains as it always was.

In this life, may God give us the eyes of faith to see what a precious gift we have in this Sacrament. Just think how much more we will appreciate it when we finally arrive in our heavenly home through Christ. Amen. 

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<sup>1</sup> LC Baptism 43.