

Victory over the Vapor

How the Cross Alone Annihilates the Culture of Death

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Key Words

Culture of death; Lutheran theology; Law and Gospel; *hebel* (vapor/futility); bodily resurrection; *sola gratia* (grace alone); *sola fide* (faith alone); *solus Christus* (in Christ alone); original sin; total depravity; means of grace; vocation; eschatology; Christology; mortification; vivification; Ecclesiastes; Psalm 49; Romans 8; 1 Corinthians 15.

Standard Abbreviations for Lutheran Sources used in Essay

AC:	Augsburg Confession
AP:	Apology of the Augsburg Confession
FC Ep:	Formula of Concord, Epitome
FC SD:	Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration
LC:	Large Catechism
LW:	Luther's Works
SA:	Smalcald Articles
SC:	Small Catechism

1.0 Introduction: Confronting the Culture of Death with Lutheran Theology

THE CONTEMPORARY “CULTURE OF DEATH” represents far more than the biological reality of human mortality. It encompasses a pervasive existential condition of futility and despair that characterizes fallen existence alienated from God’s redemptive purposes. This essay demonstrates how Lutheran theology’s fundamental hermeneutic of Law and Gospel provides both an unflinching diagnosis of this cultural malaise and a transformative cure grounded in Christ’s atoning sacrifice at Calvary and bodily resurrection.

1.1 Defining the “Culture of Death”

Contemporary society in the Global North is deeply enmeshed in what has been termed a “Culture of Death.”¹ The phrase was most fully articulated by Pope John Paul II in his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, where he synthesized themes from earlier writings within the framework of twentieth-century Catholic moral theology and its critique of modernity. While acknowledging this origin, Lutheran theology approaches the concept from a different vantage point. Rather than grounding its analysis in natural law ethics, Lutheran theology reframes the “Culture of Death” through its central hermeneutic—the proper distinction between Law and Gospel—emphasizing the Law’s unflinching diagnosis of sin and mortality and the Gospel’s proclamation of Christ’s victory over death.

The culture-of-death phenomenon—manifested in practices such as abortion and euthanasia, as well as in pervasive existential despair and rising suicide rates—extends beyond the mere inevitability of physical mortality that confronts every human being. It encompasses a pervasive existential condition marked by futility, transience, and the profound despair stemming from the cosmic rupture introduced by the Fall (Gen 3). It evokes the biblical notion of hebel (Eccl 1:2)—life perceived as a fleeting vapor, a breath that dissipates without enduring substance when lived “under the sun” (v. 3),² apart from God’s redemptive purposes.

This culture manifests itself in humanity’s relentless yet fruitless pursuits of meaning through earthly wisdom, accomplishments, wealth, or legacies, all of which are ultimately nullified by death’s impartial and democratizing dominion (Ps 49:7–9, 10–13). It echoes the groaning of a creation subjected to corruption and futility due to sin (Rom 8:20–22), fostering an underlying anxiety and hopelessness that infiltrates personal psyches, cultural narratives, and institutional frameworks. Secular and philosophical countermeasures—such as technological utopianism, hedonistic escapism, stoic endurance, or nihilistic resignation—prove inadequate because they address mere symptoms while evading the root cause: humanity’s bondage to original sin and the resultant fallenness of the entire human nature (Rom 3:23; 5:12; AP II.3. 6–8).³ These approaches offer temporary relief at best, but they implode under the weight of the grave, being powerless to deliver true liberation from death’s tyranny.

1.2 The Lutheran Theological Lens

Against the preceding grim backdrop, Lutheran theology provides a coherent and potent response, grounded in its central hermeneutic: the distinction between Law and Gospel. The Law serves as the unflinching diagnostic tool, exposing the “Culture of Death” in its totality—the vapid pointlessness spotlighted by Ecclesiastes, the impotence of earthly riches in the face of the grave in Psalm 49, the futile groaning of creation in Romans 8, and death as the “last enemy” to be vanquished in 1

Corinthians 15. By condemning sin and revealing human helplessness, the Law dismantles all pretensions of self-sufficiency and false securities, underscoring the utter absurdity of existence lived in alienation from God under the curse of sin and death (Rom 7:24; Gal 3:10).

This accusatory function, however, is preparatory. It humbles the sinner and creates a hunger for deliverance, setting the stage for the Gospel’s liberating proclamation. The Gospel, in turn, announces God’s decisive and unilateral intervention: the redemptive ransom secured by the Messiah at the cross, who alone redeems from the power of *Sheol* (the “grave”; Ps 49:15); the assured hope of glory, received *sola fide* (by faith alone) amid temporal sufferings (Rom 8:18–27); and the ultimate defeat of death *sola gratia* (by grace alone) through Christ’s bodily resurrection and the promise of our own (1 Cor 15:20–28, 51–57; 1 Thess 4:13–17). This Law/Gospel dialectic—diagnosis leading to cure, condemnation yielding to justification—affirms that salvation is entirely God’s work, *extra nos* (outside of us), appropriated through Word and Sacrament as means of grace (AC V.1–3).

This essay elucidates this Law/Gospel dialectic by examining selective portions from four key biblical texts—Ecclesiastes, Psalm 49, Romans 8, and 1 Corinthians 15—in sequence, demonstrating their collective contribution to a robust theological framework. In doing so, the essay addresses the central query of the current issue of *Verba Vitae*: “Culture of Death: How shall we live?” These passages reveal that genuine existence, purpose, and hope emerge not by denying death’s stark reality or the inherent uselessness of existence apart from Christ, but by directly confronting them. This is done first through the lens of the Law, and second by receiving the Gospel’s liberating promise of grace, bodily resurrection, and eternal victory in union with Christ.⁴ Such grace not only sustains life in the present but also endures beyond the grave through the endless ages of eternity.⁵

2.0 Ecclesiastes: The Law’s Diagnosis —*Hebel* and the Depth of the Fall

ECCLESIASTES STANDS AS A UNIQUE, DIVINELY inspired oracle within Scripture, delivering a piercing diagnosis of the human condition “under the sun”—that is, life alienated from God’s redemptive revelation in Christ. Its central motif, *hebel*, functions as an unyielding theological scalpel, exposing the catastrophic rupture of the Fall and emphasizing the desperate necessity of the Gospel.⁶

2.1 *Hebel* as an Existential Reality

Kohelet’s foundational declaration in Ecclesiastes 1:2 establishes the relentless cadence of his discourse.⁷ Far surpassing the mere notion of “vanity,” *hebel* evokes

the essence of breath or vapor: intrinsically transient, insubstantial, and incapable of yielding enduring meaning when grasped apart from God.⁸ This motif illuminates creation's radical impermanence—the endless cycles of nature (1:4–11), the futility of labor and legacy apart from Christ (2:18–23), and the unpredictable nature of life and death (9:11–12). Such pervasive futility, however, is no mere lament over life's brevity. It is the Holy Spirit's authoritative verdict on a creation subjected to the covenantal curse and enslaved to death (Rom 8:20). *Hebel* manifests the profound corruption unveiled by the Law's unsparing light (3:20). The Law's principal role is to unveil the corruption of human nature and its resulting transgressions. Ecclesiastes encapsulates this revelation by portraying *hebel* as the inescapable affliction of life condemned by the Law, compelling sinners to confront their utter helplessness.

2.2 Exposing the Fall's Consequences

Kohelet traces the source of this *hebel* (i.e., what is ephemeral, useless, and absurd) to its primal source: original sin and the total depravity it effects.⁹ His stark assertion about humanity's shared destiny with beasts unmasks the Fall's universal devastation: "For the outcome (or destination) for the children of Adam and the outcome for animals is the same. . . . All were from the dust, and to the dust all return" (Eccl 3:19–20). Death, the great equalizer, strips away humanity's ordained dignity, reducing it in mortality to mere creatureliness, echoing the Edenic curse: "For you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19).¹⁰

Hebel's indiscriminate reign—ensnaring wise and foolish, ostensibly righteous and wicked, rich and poor—bears witness to the inherited depravity from Adam. It renders all human faculties corrupt and incapable of achieving righteousness before God (*coram Deo*). Reason (Eccl 1:13–18), toil and pleasure (2:1–11, 17), riches (2:18–23; 5:10–17), and even wisdom itself (8:16–17) prove futile (*hebel*) in conquering death or securing eternal purpose. The resulting despair—"In fact, with much wisdom comes much frustration (or grief). The more knowledge, the more pain!" (1:18)—stems directly from the fallen nature described in the *Augsburg Confession*: "since the fall of Adam, all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers' wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God" (AC II.1).¹¹ Ecclesiastes vivifies this depravity as the tangible experience of existence under the Law's condemnation.

2.3 Ecclesiastes in Lutheran Theology

Within a Lutheran framework, Ecclesiastes functions as the Law personified in Scripture. The treatise's unrelenting scrutiny forbids escape from the diagnosed abyss:

humanity's utter impotence to overcome death or secure self-derived, lasting meaning "under the sun" (1:3). Methodically, Kohelet demolishes every anthropogenic prop—earthly wisdom, labor, hedonism, prosperity, apparent justice, and merit-based piety (7:15–18; 8:10–14)—exposing them as sheer *hebel* before the realities of mortality and divine judgment.¹² No path to self-justification or auto-salvation emerges, only the Law's merciless revelation of bondage to futility and the grave. This severity perfectly encapsulates the essence of the Law, which "always accuses" (*lex semper accusat*), exposes the profound extent of our corruption, and highlights our urgent need for Christ.¹³ Ecclesiastes executes this accusatory function with unparalleled acuity, shattering all pretensions of independence and self-sufficiency.

Nevertheless, the ultimate purpose of Kohelet's treatise is preparatory. By plunging the sinner into the void of self-dependence—"So I hated life ... because everything is vapor and chasing the wind" (Eccl 2:17)—it creates an acute existential crisis that demands divine deliverance. As the preeminent scriptural enactment of the Law's theological use, Ecclesiastes crushes pride and autonomy, preparing the soul to receive the Gospel.¹⁴ Ecclesiastes masterfully evokes this terror and desolation, directing the afflicted toward the only remedy: true meaning, life, and justification found *extra nos*—in the unmerited grace of God manifested in Christ, the sole antidote to *hebel*'s ruthless tyranny. As stated earlier, the Law serves chiefly to uncover the sin we inherit and all the wrongdoing that springs from it. It drives the Law-shattered individual to cry out for the Gospel's balm (Rom 7:24–25).

3.0 Psalm 49: The Law's Exposure and the Seed of Gospel Hope

PSALM 49 INTENSIFIES THE LAW'S DIAGNOSIS of the "Culture of Death," advancing beyond existential futility to confront humanity's universal and inescapable enemy: death itself. The contemplative poem systematically dismantles fallen humanity's primary illusion of security—earthly wealth and worldly achievement—by exposing their utter impotence against the relentless onslaught of mortality, while simultaneously planting the crucial seed of Gospel hope anchored exclusively in divine action.

3.1 The Universality of Death: The Law's Inexorable Verdict

The Psalmist proclaims death's absolute sovereignty with devastating clarity: "But no one can by any means redeem himself. He cannot give God a ransom for himself—(The ransom for their souls is costly. Any payment would fall short.)—so that he could live on forever and not see the pit" (Ps 49:7–9). This stark declaration constitutes the Law's uncompromising verdict against all humanity. Death democratizes with callous efficiency—neither status, wisdom, nor accumulated riches can purchase exemption from the grave (v. 10).¹⁵

Through this pronouncement, the Law exposes the foundational deception undergirding the “Culture of Death”: the delusion that human resources—whether intellectual, material, or social—can overcome sin’s terminal consequence (Gen 3:19; Jas 1:9–11). As noted earlier, this universal mortality testifies to the doctrine of total depravity articulated in the *Augsburg Confession*: Every person born into the world is inherently flawed and tainted by iniquity. They lack reverence for the Creator, refuse to rely on him, and are burdened by deviant yearnings (AC II.1–2). As the *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord* explains, this state of existence is not only devoid of original righteousness but so deeply corrupted that nothing virtuous remains (FC SD I.11). The apostolic witness confirms this verdict: “So then, just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, so also death spread to all people because all sinned” (Rom 5:12). No earthly power can ransom what sin has claimed; death’s universality strips away every pretension of human self-sufficiency.

3.2 The Folly of False Security: Earthly Wealth as Ultimate Vanity

Having established death’s universal dominion, Psalm 49 exposes humanity’s irrational trust in temporal securities. Despite witnessing death’s indiscriminate harvest—“Yes, we can see that wise men die. The fool and the senseless alike perish, and they leave their wealth to others” (v. 10)—humanity persists in its false belief: “They think their houses will remain forever, their dwellings for generation after generation because they named lands after themselves” (v. 11).

The Law here executes its accusatory function by brutally dismantling misplaced confidence in created things. The accumulation of riches and the fabrication of monuments—these desperate attempts at self-perpetuation—are exposed as *hebel*, a mere vapor that dissipates in the face of death’s predatory advance (Eccl 2:18–23). The wealthy discover their ultimate equality with beasts: “A man who has riches but does not understand is like the animals that perish” (Ps 49:20; see also v. 12).

This persistent idolatry of wealth stems from the radical corruption of human nature described in the *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord*: “in divine matters the intellect, heart, and will of a natural, unregenerated man is not only totally turned away from God, but is also turned and perverted against God and toward all evil” (FC SD II.17). Indeed, fallen humanity’s natural reason or intellect is entirely blind and incapable of understanding. As Luther explains in the *Large Catechism*, such misplaced trust violates the First Commandment’s essence: “That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God” (LC I.3). The wealthy trust their riches rather than the Creator, thereby fashioning an idol from mammon—a lifeless deity that is powerless against death’s approach. Psalm 49 thus functions as divine judgment upon this false security, revealing how sin has so corrupted human perception that we seek life where only death resides.

3.3 The Glimpse of Redemption: The Gospel Promise Amid the Law's Condemnation

At Psalm 49's theological apex, divine promise interrupts human despair: "But surely God will redeem my life from the power of the grave. Yes, he will take me to himself" (v. 15).¹⁶ This verse marks the crucial turning point—a divinely planted seed of Gospel hope breaking through the Law's unsparing condemnation. The contrast is absolute and intentional. Where human effort fails categorically ("no one can by any means redeem himself"; v. 7), God acts decisively by providing a ransom. So then, this hope rests not on any human capacity, merit, or resource, but solely on God's sovereign, gracious, and unilateral intervention. Here, Lutheran theology emphasizes that salvation is entirely *extra nos*, an act of pure divine grace.

Such prophetic anticipation finds its fulfillment in Christ's redemptive work at Calvary, as he declared: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45; see also Matt 20:28). The Psalmist's hope prefigures the Gospel's central proclamation that sinners "receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us" (AC IV.1–2). Christ alone accomplishes what no human ransom could achieve, conquering death through his resurrection (Col 2:13–15).

As Luther expounds in the *Large Catechism*, this divine promise becomes ours through faith alone by the power of the Holy Spirit (LC II.3.38). The *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord* affirms that faith is God's gift, teaching that an unsaved person's intellect and will are merely the passive recipients of His saving, regenerating work (FC SD II.25–26, 52–54). Thus, even our reception of redemption testifies to God's monergistic grace.¹⁷ Psalm 49 therefore accomplishes a dual theological task: through the Law, the contemplative poem exposes death's tyranny and humanity's futile trust in temporal securities. Through its pivotal Gospel promise, the psalm directs faith toward the only source of true redemption—God's gracious action in Christ. This seed of hope, planted in the Old Testament soil, blossoms fully in the New Testament's proclamation of Christ as the divine ransom who defeats *Sheol*, transforming the "Culture of Death" into the promise of eternal life for all who trust in the Son.

4.0 Romans 8, Gospel Hope: *Sola Fide* Amid Suffering

BUILDING ON THE LAW'S UNFLINCHING VERDICT against fallen humanity in Ecclesiastes and Psalm 49, Romans 8 announces the Gospel's decisive and liberating counterword. Paul does not evade the grim realities of the "Culture of Death." Rather, he

reframes suffering through the Spirit-given lens of sure and certain hope. The apostle reveals that believers—sustained by the Spirit through faith alone (*sola fide*)—endure present afflictions in light of a future glory secured by grace alone (*sola gratia*), in Christ alone (*solus Christus*).

4.1 Suffering and Glory

Paul directly addresses the inescapable suffering of a creation subjected to futility, rejecting both Stoic detachment and hedonistic escape. He describes creation’s “slavery to corruption” (Rom 8:21) and its collective “groaning” (v. 22) as the universal post-Eden condition—a vivid outworking of Genesis 3’s curse and the Law’s condemning verdict, from which no one is exempt.

Yet, this grim chorus is met with a greater theme: “I conclude that our sufferings at the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). This glory is not a wage earned, but a gift bestowed, grounded entirely in Christ’s person and saving work. His resurrection is both the firstfruits and the unbreakable pledge of creation’s full liberation (v. 23).¹⁸ The believer’s hope is not anchored in fluctuating earthly conditions but in Christ’s irreversible eschatological victory. Justification by faith alone is already declared (SA II.1.4); its consummation awaits the bodily resurrection, when righteousness now hidden will be manifest. Christians thus live in the tension of the “already” and the “not yet,” clinging to a triumph already secured.¹⁹

4.2 The Spirit’s Ministry

In this dynamic tension, God does not leave his children to navigate by their own strength. The Spirit’s ministry is active, personal, and sustaining. In our frailty—exposed even in prayer—the “Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that are not expressed in words” (Rom 8:26). The Spirit’s advocacy assures us that our communion with God is not contingent upon our compulsive and flawless pietistic devotion, but rather on his relentless initiative. The Spirit intercedes “according to God’s will” (v. 27), thereby fastening our weak faith to his immovable promise.²⁰

This ministry is indispensable, for believers live as *simul iustus et peccator*—at once righteous before God (*coram Deo*) and yet still plagued by a sinful nature (SD III.22–23). The Spirit consoles troubled consciences with the Gospel, daily confirming our adoption as God’s children despite the decay that surrounds and inhabits us. As Luther confesses, the Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith” (SC II.3.6). Through the living Word, the Spirit kindles and preserves faith that endures—not by sheer human resolve, but as a continual reception of the Lord’s sustaining grace.

4.3 Living by *Sola Fide*

Romans 8 culminates in the defining reality of the Christian life: to live wholly by faith alone. This hope is neither mere optimism nor the fruit of moral performance, but the Spirit-produced trust that receives Christ's finished work as its sole sufficiency. Faith is the empty hand receiving the promise: "Indeed, he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also graciously give us all things along with him?" (Rom 8:32). Faith is no meritorious act, but the God-given means by which the sinner embraces Christ's saving benefits (John 1:12; Rom 10:17; AP IV.1).

The foundation of faith is the historical and objective redemption accomplished *extra nos* at the Cross (Rom 8:3). There, God decisively condemned sin and established victory over death. As the *Apology* affirms, the lost, by God's undeserved kindness, receive the forgiveness of sins and justification when they trust "that God is reconciled and favorably disposed to [them] because of Christ" (AP IV.43–47). Amid the "Culture of Death," the Christian posture is receptive, not self-reliant—holding fast to the glory promised and the faith that apprehends it. This hope stands in direct opposition to the Law's futile striving, resting wholly on God's grace in Christ, applied and preserved by the Spirit through the Word and Sacraments.

5.0 First Corinthians 15, Gospel Victory: *Sola Gratia* Over Death

HAVING DIAGNOSED THE "CULTURE OF DEATH" through the Law's unsparing lens and sustained hope amid suffering through faith in Christ alone, the Christian confession ascends to its triumphant crescendo in 1 Corinthians 15. Here, Paul proclaims the Gospel's definitive conquest over death's tyrannical dominion: the bodily resurrection of Christ and the certain resurrection of all believers. Far from offering only consolation, this passage heralds a concrete historical and eschatological victory achieved *sola gratia*. In doing so, it shatters the very foundations of *hebel*, that vaporous futility pervading fallen existence "under the sun" (Eccl 1:3) and banishes despair from the believers' horizon.

5.1 Christ's Resurrection: The Decisive Victory

Christian hope rests entirely upon the historical reality of Christ's resurrection (1 Cor 15:1–8). Without this foundational truth, the Gospel collapses into ruin, faith proves to be *hebel* (i.e., ephemeral, useless, and absurd), and believers remain imprisoned within sin's deadly grasp: "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (v. 17). Yet, Christ has indeed risen—not as an isolated anomaly, but as the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (v. 20). In keeping

with what was noted earlier, this agrarian metaphor carries profound eschatological weight: as the initial harvest sheaf guarantees the coming abundance, so Christ's resurrection both pledges and prototypes every believer's bodily renewal, ensuring that "as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive" (v. 22).²¹ This constitutes no fleeting abstraction but a tangible reversal of the Genesis 3:19 curse, redeeming physical creation itself to align with God's original design.

The eschatological triumph reaches its zenith in death's complete annihilation. Echoing the ancient prophets (e.g., Isa 25:8), Paul exults: "death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor 15:54). Death—that "last enemy" (v. 26) and impartial scourge exposed by the Law in Ecclesiastes and Psalm 49—is dethroned forever. Here lies the cosmic pivot where the "Culture of Death" dissolves, not through human cleverness or compulsive virtue signaling, but through divine omnipotence alone. Indeed, Christ has "abolished death" (2 Tim 1:10) and has redeemed us from the grave (SC II.4; LC II.25, 31).

5.2 Resurrection as *Sola Gratia*

The resurrection hope revealed here stands as God's unadulterated, unmerited gift, accomplished entirely *extra nos* and conferred upon sinners who are utterly devoid of worthiness. Secured through Christ's perfect obedience, vicarious atonement, and triumphant rising, this victory represents God's sovereign work alone: "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (1 Cor 15:57). The believer contributes absolutely nothing, receiving this gift solely through faith—itsself a divine bestowal (FC SD II.25, 55; Eph 2:8, "Indeed, it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God").

This grace demolishes any pretense of semi-Pelagian cooperation or human synergy in salvation.²² The believers' resurrection emerges not as a meritorious recompense but as a gracious bestowal upon those united to Christ through faith alone. To reiterate what was previously noted, the *Augsburg Confession* grounds justification in God's exclusive agency, declaring that a state of righteousness before the Creator is received by his grace, on account of Christ, and "through faith" (AC IV.1–2). As justification's eschatological consummation, the resurrection hope actualizes this forensic declaration in corporeal form, embodying *sola gratia* at its apex—a redemption so comprehensive that it liberates even our mortal frames from corruption's bondage (1 Cor 15:42–44).

5.3 Impact on the Christian Life

The certainty of the believers' resurrection fundamentally transforms their existence within the "Culture of Death," infusing eternal significance into labors otherwise condemned to *hebel*. Paul's imperative flows inevitably from this assurance: "There-

fore, my dear brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the Lord's work, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:58).²³ In stark contrast to Ecclesiastes' under-the-sun futility, Christian vocation endures, woven tightly into the fabric of God's imperishable kingdom.

Far from encouraging otherworldly retreat, this hope ignites bold engagement with temporal realities. Liberated from death's terrorizing dominion (Heb 2:15, "and free those who were held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death"), Christians abandon self-aggrandizing monuments to embrace joyful service. Luther captures this paradoxical freedom: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" (*Career of the Reformer I*, LW 31:344). Animated by the Spirit and anchored in Christ's empty tomb, believers confront the "Culture of Death" neither with grim stoicism nor escapist indulgence, but with fervent, hopeful labor born of unshakeable promise—a glorious resurrection achieved *sola gratia*.

6.0 Synthesis: The Law/Gospel Dynamic for Engaging the Culture of Death

THE PRECEDING EXAMINATION OF ECCLESIASTES, Psalm 49, Romans 8, and 1 Corinthians 15 unveils not disparate theological fragments, but a magnificent biblical symphony orchestrated around one central motif: the dynamic tension between Law and Gospel. This fundamental Lutheran hermeneutic provides a theological lens capable of analyzing and engaging the "Culture of Death." Through this dialectical framework, Scripture offers a threefold movement: relentless diagnosis, gracious cure, and empowered discipleship.

6.1 The Unified Biblical Witness Against Death's Dominion

Far from presenting contradictory perspectives on human mortality, the canonical witness demonstrates remarkable coherence in its twofold assault upon death's tyranny—first exposing its absolute sovereignty over fallen creation, then proclaiming its decisive defeat through Christ's resurrection victory.

6.1.1 The Law's Merciless Diagnosis: Ecclesiastes and Psalm 49

These Old Testament texts execute with surgical precision what Luther identified as the Law's convicting function (FC SD V.1, 9–10). Ecclesiastes provides the comprehensive phenomenology of fallen existence, defining the human condition as *hebel*—a vapor-like futility that pervades all earthly endeavor "under the sun" (Eccl 1:3). This assessment traces humanity's existential bankruptcy to its theological source: the comprehensive corruption of original sin, which renders all

human achievement as transient as a morning mist (Eccl 3:19–20; Jas 4:14; FC SD I.9–10). Kohelet’s relentless refrain—“Nothing but vapor ... Totally vapor” (Eccl 1:2)—serves as the Law’s searing indictment against every pretension of human self-sufficiency.

Psalm 49 intensifies this diagnosis by demolishing humanity’s most cherished delusion: the belief that seemingly limitless material resources can purchase exemption from mortality’s sentence. As noted earlier, the psalmist declares with devastating clarity that “no one can by any means redeem himself. He cannot give God a ransom for himself. (For the ransom for their souls is costly. Any payment would fall short)” (vv. 7–8). This passage obliterates the foundation of all works-righteousness, demonstrating that even the wealthiest cannot “live on forever” (v. 9) or avoid the “pit” (i.e., decay and death). Together, these texts fulfill the Law’s essential function: to ensure that “every mouth will be silenced and the whole world will be subject to God’s judgment” (Rom 3:19). So then, human pretense is stripped away, creating the spiritual vacuum that only divine grace can fill.

6.1.2 The Gospel’s Triumphant Resolution: Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 15

Against this backdrop of comprehensive futility, the New Testament proclaims the Gospel’s definitive response—not by denying suffering’s reality, but by recontextualizing it within God’s redemptive purpose. Romans 8 acknowledges the present groaning of creation while anchoring the believers’ hope in God’s immutable promise: “For I conclude that our sufferings at the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). This hope rests not on subjective religious experience but on the objective work of the Holy Spirit, who “intercedes for us with groans that are not expressed in words” (v. 26), sustaining faith precisely when human strength fails (FC SD II.25–26).

This confident expectation reaches its crescendo in 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul proclaims the historical fact of Christ’s bodily resurrection as the firstfruits of the general resurrection (v. 20). Here the Gospel’s victory cry sounds forth: “Death, where is your sting? Grave, where is your victory?” (v. 55). What the Law identified as humanity’s “last enemy” (v. 26), the Gospel announces as a vanquished foe, transforming all labor “in the Lord” (v. 58) from *hebel* into eternal significance. This transformation occurs *sola gratia* through *sola fide*, as believers receive by faith what Christ accomplished *extra nos* in his death and resurrection (AC IV.1).

6.2 Lutheran Theological Balance: The Proper Distinction

This biblical witness achieves its clearest systematic expression in confessional Lutheran theology, which maintains the crucial balance between Law and Gospel through their proper distinction (*distinctio* rather than *separatio*).²⁴

6.2.1 The Law's Threefold Function: Revelation, Condemnation, and Guidance

To reiterate what was mentioned earlier, the fundamental office of the Law is to make manifest our sinful condition at birth and every sin that flows from it (FC SD V.17-19; I.5-6). Indeed, the Law always condemns human works, thereby crushing every attempt at self-justification and creating that “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt 5:6) which drives sinners to seek mercy in Christ alone.²⁵ The Law's work is surgical in nature. It kills false hope to prepare for true life, performing the *mortificatio* (putting to death) that necessarily precedes *vivificatio* (making alive in the waters of baptism; Rom 6:1-4; Gal 3:27; Col 2:11-12; AP XII.51). For the believer, the Law also serves a third use (*tertius usus legis*), providing a guide for a life of gratitude (FC EP VI.1-7). However, this guidance is always exercised under the Cross and in the freedom of the Gospel, and it never ceases to expose the sin that remains in the believer, driving them back to Christ.

6.2.2 The Gospel's Singular Focus: Divine Grace and Empowerment

In stark contrast, the Gospel functions as pure promise. The good news is the unconditional declaration of what God has accomplished for sinners at Calvary. The Gospel counters sin not with strict laws but by freely granting righteousness through faith in Christ. The *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord* emphasizes that God, “out of pure grace, without any merit of their own, justifies and saves” (FC SD V.25) those who believe the Gospel. Beyond justification, this same good news empowers sanctification through the Holy Spirit, who “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith” (SC III.6).

6.2.3 Theological Safeguards: Rejecting False Alternatives

This Law/Gospel dialectic provides essential immunization against theological error. It categorically rejects the shallow optimism of secular humanism and semi-Pelagianism, which minimize sin's destructive power and humanity's need for divine rescue. Simultaneously, this Law/Gospel dialectic repudiates the paralyzing despair of nihilistic philosophy by anchoring hope entirely in God's objective accomplishment rather than subjective human performance or feeling. The believer exists as *simul iustus et peccator*—simultaneously righteous through imputed righteousness yet remaining sinful in nature—living within the creative tension between justification's “already” and glorification's “not yet” (FC SD III.32; VI.7, 18-19).

6.3 Pastoral Application: A Distinctively Lutheran Engagement

This theological framework generates a uniquely Lutheran posture for confronting the “Culture of Death”—one characterized by unflinching realism wedded to transformative hope.

6.3.1 Honest Acknowledgment: Embracing the Law's Diagnosis

The Church's faithful witness begins with courageous acceptance of the Law's verdict upon human existence. Rather than offering cheap consolation or therapeutic amelioration, pastoral care must first grant permission to experience the full weight of sin, mortality, and cosmic futility. This approach mirrors Scripture's own methodology: the Law exposes sin and brings dread to the "conscience" (AP XII.32) so that the Gospel may truly comfort with Christ's grace. Authentic ministry therefore validates the human experience of *hebel*—acknowledging with Ecclesiastes that apart from God's grace, all earthly striving terminates in dust. This is not pessimism but prophetic realism, creating the existential space where divine grace can be received as genuinely good news.

The Church must resist contemporary culture's tendency to sanitize or sentimentalize death. Following the psalmist's lead, the Church speaks truthfully about mortality's universal dominion, the inadequacy of human resources to secure lasting meaning, and the absolute bankruptcy of self-salvation immortality projects. This honest acknowledgment serves the Law's proper function by stripping away illusions and preparing hearts to receive what only divine grace can provide.

6.3.2 Transformative Proclamation: Applying the Gospel's Power

Admittedly, an honest diagnosis serves only as a prelude to the main movement: the triumphant proclamation of Christ's victory over death, sin, and futility. The Church's central task involves the concrete application of Gospel balm through the divinely instituted means of grace. According to the *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord*, the proclaimed and received Word of God serves as the chosen tool of the Holy Spirit. By it, and in connection with it, he powerfully accomplishes his purpose of turning people to God, creating in them the very desire and ability to obey his will (FC SD II.52; Phil 2:12–13). Through these tangible promises, the Church announces that God has indeed redeemed our life from the "grave" (Ps 49:15) through the perfect ransom paid by Christ on the cross (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45).

This proclamation directly addresses the deepest anxieties of the "Culture of Death." Where pagan society offers only the frantic pursuit of legacy-building and meaning-making, the Gospel provides the firm assurance of bodily resurrection and eternal life. This hope liberates believers from the exhausting burden of self-validation, freeing them for joyful service within their divinely appointed vocations. Knowing that their "labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor 15:58), Christians can engage earthly responsibilities with both temporal seriousness and eternal perspective. They minister as salt and light within a death-dominated society while maintaining their citizenship in the eternal kingdom that cannot be shaken (Phil 3:20–21; Heb 12:28).

Through this Law/Gospel dialectic, the Church offers neither false comfort nor paralyzing despair, but the realistic hope that alone can engage the “Culture of Death” with both pastoral sensitivity and theological integrity. In a fallen world seeking meaning within the vapor of temporal existence, Lutheran theology provides the unchanging foundation of Christ’s accomplished redemption, delivered through the Word and Sacraments by grace alone, through faith alone, in union with Christ alone, and to the glory of God alone.²⁶

6.3.3 Pastoral Care amid Euthanasia and Suicide Ideation

The Law/Gospel dialectic provides an indispensable framework for ministering to those struggling with the despair that often accompanies thoughts of euthanasia or suicide. The Law must speak truthfully, naming sin and confronting the false hope that self-determined escape from suffering can bring peace. This honest word exposes the futility of seeking relief through death—a path that can neither alleviate guilt nor secure true peace with God.

Yet, the Law’s condemning word is never God’s final word. Into the depths of despair, the Gospel proclaims Christ’s unconditional promise: He has borne the full weight of sin and conquered death’s tyranny through his cross and resurrection. Pastoral care therefore moves from the Law’s diagnosis to the Gospel’s consolation, applying the means of grace to troubled consciences. Through God’s Word, Absolution, and the Sacraments, the pastor proclaims that the believer’s worth and hope rest not in the capacity to endure suffering but in Christ’s finished work *extra nos*. This cruciform comfort liberates believers from despair’s grip, assuring them that even amid profound suffering, they remain God’s beloved children, sustained by the Holy Spirit until the day when all sorrow gives way to resurrection glory.

6.3.4 Addressing Societal Narratives of Death-Denial

Lutheran congregations have an opportunity to address a culture that sanitizes mortality through euphemism, technological optimism, and therapeutic distraction—strategies that ultimately deepen estrangement from the truth of the human condition. Faithful engagement begins by reclaiming Scripture’s honesty: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19). This confession, far from being morbid, serves the Law’s proper function by exposing human mortality and the futility of denying death.

The Church, however, does not stop with the Law. It proclaims the Gospel’s victorious word. Through preaching, teaching, and liturgical worship, congregations declare Christ’s resurrection as God’s definitive answer to death, embedding this hope in worship that acknowledges death’s reality while celebrating the new life Christ has won. Pastoral practice may include public forums on a Christian under-

standing of death and dying, funeral planning that reflects Christian hope, and catechetical instruction that presents death as a passage under God's gracious promise rather than a defeat to be hidden. In this way, the Church becomes a countercultural community—neither trivializing death nor romanticizing it, but bearing witness to Christ, who has “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim 1:10).

7.0 Conclusion: Living the Paradox of Faith and Faithfulness in the Shadow of Death

LUTHERAN ENGAGEMENT WITH THE “CULTURE OF DEATH” culminates not in a simplistic and shallow resolution but in a profound paradox. It is a mode of existence simultaneously grounded in the Law's unflinching candor about human frailty and the Gospel's victorious assurance of divine redemption. This cruciform life, shaped by the fundamental distinction between Law and Gospel, empowers believers to confront mortality without despair and to labor in temporal vocations with unshakeable eternal confidence.

7.1 The Paradoxical Christian Existence

The Christian inhabits the daily tension between two inseparable realities. The Law delivers Ecclesiastes' stark verdict: humanity is dust and destined to return to dust (Gen 3:19; Eccl 3:20). Denial of this universal condition constitutes dangerous self-deception. The believer therefore fully acknowledges death as the “last enemy” (1 Cor 15:26) and the reign of *hebel* (futility) that characterizes all existence “under the sun” (Eccl 1:3).

Yet, through the Gospel, the same believer simultaneously clings to the promise that this enemy stands defeated and this futility redeemed. The Christian thus lives *simul mortuus et vivificatus*—simultaneously dead in sin yet made alive in Christ.²⁷ This reality finds its eschatological fulfillment in the promised resurrection of the body—not a spiritualized escape from materiality, but confident trust in God's power to redeem the entire created order, including our mortal flesh (Rom 8:23).

This dual awareness generates a distinctive pattern of life. With Kohelet, the Christian confesses the vapor-like quality inherent in all earthly endeavor. No human immortality project can ultimately defeat death or construct a lasting legacy apart from God's sovereign intervention. This confession mortifies idolatrous desires for self-justification that involve achievement and accumulation. Yet, because Christ's resurrection has invested all creation with transcendent purpose, the Christian labors with unshakeable confidence. When work is embraced as a sacred calling and carried out in faith, it is liberated from bearing ultimate meaning and transforms into joyful

gratitude in action. As Paul declares, such “labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor 15:58). The *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord* affirms that good works flowing from faith constitute gratitude-filled service to God and neighbor, never a means of obtaining grace (FC SD IV.9–12).

7.2 Faithful Cultural Engagement

Armed with the Law/Gospel dialectic, the Church repudiates two dominant yet deficient responses to human mortality. It condemns as a false Gospel the naive optimism of secular humanism, which denies sin’s depth and divine judgment’s reality, while suggesting humanity can engineer salvation (AC II.1–3). Conversely, the Church rejects as the escapist despair of nihilism and hedonism, which correctly diagnose futility but, lacking Gospel hope, can only conclude life’s meaninglessness (especially apart from Christ; 1 Cor 15:32). Lutheran theology exposes both as failures to distinguish the Creator from his creation, conflating divine omnipotence with human impotence (LC II.1.13–16).

Faithful cultural engagement instead follows the cruciform pattern of Christ’s victory—life emerging through death. Here, the “Culture of Death” encounters the “Culture of the Cross,” where the Messiah’s victory redefines existence and where suffering receives meaning within God’s redemptive purposes (Rom 8:18). The Law continually executes (*mortificatio*) the old Adam—the hubris, self-reliance, and terror that cultural death-denial fosters. The Gospel simultaneously vivifies (*vivificatio*), raising a vast cohort of “new creation” believers who are empowered for faithful and fruitful service (by the Spirit through the means of grace; John 15:1–5; Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17). As noted earlier, this transformational reality produces a redeemed community embodying the famous irony that in union with Christ, one is free from all yet bound to all in love. These believers enter fearlessly into the world’s suffering and transience by serving neighbors through their vocations as living testimony to the hope within them (1 Pet 3:15).

7.3 The Ultimate Hope

Christian hope rests not on wishful thinking but on historical certainty: the bodily resurrection of the Messiah, which constitutes faith’s cornerstone (1 Cor 15:14). Here, the “Culture of Death” meets absolute termination. The grave appears not as a dignified passage but as a defeated enemy, its sting—sin and the Law’s condemnation—has been extracted by Christ’s atoning sacrifice (vv. 55–56). In keeping with previous observations, the *Augsburg Confession* anchors the believers’ entire hope in this objective, external truth: “we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but . . . by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith” (AC IV.1). The tyranny of death, once an implacable foe, is shattered by the One who enters death’s domain and emerges victorious.

Gospel promise culminates not in creation's abandonment but in its restoration. Resurrection hope embraces the entire universe, destined for liberation from decay's bondage (Rom 8:21). The ephemeral and transient nature of the *hebel* (vapor) will be replaced by what is substantial and enduring. Also, groaning will be replaced by an unending chorus of praise. This eternal fulfillment provides the ultimate answer to a culture-of-death despair—the promise of God's everlasting kingdom where “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev 21:4). In that future day, there will be “no more death or sorrow or crying or pain, because the former things have passed away.” This “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13), received by grace alone through faith alone, sustains believers amid temporal suffering.²⁸ Such confident anticipation also empowers courageous, joyful, and purposeful endeavors until that moment when faith reaches its goal, and the divine promise achieves its glorious fulfillment.

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Notes

1. In this essay, “culture” refers to the set of beliefs, values, practices, customs, and behaviors that are learned, shared, and passed down from one generation to another within a particular group, community, or society. Culture encompasses the dynamic ways people interact, communicate, and express themselves through their traditions, art, language, and ethical norms. Culture also plays a fundamental role in shaping the identity and collective consciousness of a group, especially by providing a framework for how individuals within that group understand the world and their place in it. For an anthology that surveys Christian perspectives on culture, see Matthew Steven Bracey and Christopher Talbot, eds., *Christians in Culture: Cultivating a Christian Worldview for All of Life* (Gallatin, TN: Welch College Press, 2023). This multi-author volume offers a series of biblically and theologically grounded essays exploring how Christians understand, engage with, and influence broader culture.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Evangelical Heritage Version, © 2019 Wartburg Project, Inc. All rights reserved. In Ecclesiastes, the phrase, “under the sun,” defines the scope of the narrator's inquiry, referring to all human activity and experience within the earthly, temporal realm, apart from direct divine intervention or revelation. Also, the phrase signifies a human-centered, secular perspective—the view of life as seen through pagan eyes alone, limited to what can be observed, achieved, and understood by worldly means. Furthermore, the phrase suggests a closed system where the cycles of nature and human endeavors seem endless, repetitive, and ultimately futile when pursued solely for their own sake, without any eternal significance.
3. Original sin is the inherited condition of spiritual corruption that affects all humanity as a consequence of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden. This corruption is not simply the tendency to imitate Adam's transgression, but rather a fundamental state of alienation from God that renders humans naturally incapable of fearing, loving, and

- trusting the Creator above all things. Original sin is the source from which all actual sins flow and leaves humanity utterly dependent upon the Lord's unmerited grace, received through faith in Christ alone, for salvation and reconciliation with God.
4. On this point, see Luther's affirmation in his *Word and Sacrament III*, LW 37:372, "I believe in the resurrection of all the dead at the Last Day, both the godly and the wicked, that each may receive in his body his reward according to his merits." Here, "merits" does not imply works-righteousness or human contribution to justification. Rather, Luther speaks descriptively about the eschatological judgment in which the fruits of faith—produced by the Holy Spirit—are acknowledged, while divine condemnation falls upon unbelief. Justification remains grounded solely in Christ's righteousness, received by grace alone through faith alone.
 5. At strategic points throughout the essay, essential terms and pivotal concepts (including those mentioned above) are revisited to help readers gain a deeper analytical understanding. This emphasis is intentional, because at stake is nothing less than the integrity of the proclamation of the Gospel and the clarity of the Church's mission in a world that has embraced a "Culture of Death."
 6. *Hebel* appears as a central motif throughout Ecclesiastes: see 1:2; 1:14; 2:1; 2:11; 2:15; 2:17; 2:19; 2:21; 2:23; 2:26; 3:19; 4:4; 4:7; 4:8; 4:16; 5:7; 5:10; 6:2; 6:4; 6:9; 6:11; 7:6; 7:15; 8:10; 8:14; 9:9; 11:8; 11:10; 12:8.
 7. The term "Kohélet" (or "Qoheleth") is not a personal name but a title, meaning "one who assembles" or "the preacher," referring to a wise teacher or philosopher addressing an assembly. Ecclesiastes identifies this figure as "David's son, king in Jerusalem" (1:1), which has traditionally been understood as King Solomon. The content of the treatise originates from Solomon's teachings and sayings, though it may have been compiled and arranged by scribes after his death rather than written directly by Solomon. If so, then this compilation serves as a literary framework to explore themes about wisdom, futility, and the meaning of temporal existence on earth. Thus, scholars use "Kohélet" to designate the book's sagacious narrator, while affirming the divine inspiration and authority of the text as God's Word.
 8. Admittedly, there is no scholarly consensus regarding the meaning of *hebel*. For a detailed examination and synthesis of the academic literature dealing with the concept in Kohélet's treatise, see Kimmo Huovila, *The Contribution of the Theme of Divine Judgment in the Argument of the Book of Ecclesiastes*. PhD diss., South African Theological Seminary, 2018, <https://sats.ac.za/theses/thesis-phd-2018-huovila/>. Accessed November 28, 2025.
 9. Total depravity is the doctrine that, due to the Fall, sin has corrupted every aspect of human nature, including the intellect, will, and emotions. This does not mean humans are as evil as possible, but that no part of them is untouched by sin and thus they are spiritually dead and incapable of any good works toward salvation or of turning to God through their own reason or strength. Therefore, salvation is entirely the work of God's grace through Christ, delivered through the Word and Sacraments, and received through faith, which is itself a gift created by the Holy Spirit. *The Bondage of the Will* by Martin Luther (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2025) remains the most influential primary text for understanding total depravity in the Lutheran tradition.
 10. For a comparative analysis between Genesis 1–11 and Ecclesiastes, see Dan Lioy, "What Has Ecclesiastes to Do with Genesis 1–11?" in *What Has Ecclesiastes to Do With...? Navigating Life's Unexpected Challenges in Disruptive Times*, ed. Johnson T. K. Lim,

- 155–62 (Singapore: Word N Works, 2022). Hereafter, *Ecclesiastes*. Specifically, “Like Genesis 1–11, *Ecclesiastes* deals with the stark reality of death. This observation is especially evident in the first chapter. Indeed, it introduces major themes that are more fully deliberated in the remainder of the treatise articulated by its author” (158).
11. Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 29. All quotes in this essay from the Lutheran Confessions are from the Tappert edition.
 12. “Anthropogenic” refers to something that is caused by or resulting from human activity.
 13. On this point, see Luther’s comment in his *Lectures on Galatians*, LW 26:310: “Therefore the proper and absolute use of the Law is to terrify with lightning (as on Mt. Sinai), thunder, and the blare of the trumpet, with a thunderbolt to burn and crush that brute which is called the presumption of righteousness.”
 14. Luther captures this dynamic when he notes in his *Lectures on Galatians*, LW 26:315, that after the Law terrifies and humbles the lost, it drives them to faith in Christ (Gal 3:19–25).
 15. As noted in Lioy, *Ecclesiastes*, 157–58, “Genesis 5 records the efforts of humanity to flourish and be successful as God’s vice-regents over the planet. The biblical account reports a succession of generations from Adam to Noah. Because of God’s blessing in their lives, they gave birth to children and enjoyed incredibly long lifespans. Humans also strove to populate the world and bring it under their control. The preceding circumstance is an outworking of the creation mandate recorded in Genesis 1:28. Yet, the somber refrain appearing throughout chapter 5 is that, while people are born and live, they also eventually die (2 Bar 7:2–3; Sir 40:1; Tob 8:6). Expressed differently, regardless of the herculean attempts people make to exert their control over the created realm, it is sabotaged by death. Even more to the point, the presence of sin and death within humanity undercut the efforts of each successive generation to fulfill what the Creator originally intended. Regardless of the era in which people exist, not even their continued and vigorous attempts to thrive can forestall the termination of their lives.”
 16. Though only a few Old Testament passages explicitly speak about the resurrection (e.g., Job 19:26–27; Isa 26:19; Dan 12:1–2), these promises are brought to full clarity and fulfillment in Christ as revealed in the New Testament.
 17. Monergism is the doctrine that salvation is accomplished solely by God’s grace through Christ, without any human cooperation or merit. This is grounded in the belief that, due to humanity’s total spiritual corruption from original sin, fallen people cannot contribute to, cooperate in, or prepare for their own conversion. Therefore, saving faith itself is not a human work or decision but is created and given by the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace—the Word (Gospel) of God and the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion.
 18. Paul portrays the created order as a woman experiencing the anguishing “pains” (Rom 8:22) of childbirth. This groaning for deliverance is ever present. Believers sigh alongside “creation” (v. 23), even as God bestows on them the Spirit as a foretaste and guarantee of their future glory (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13–14; 4:30). This concept of “firstfruits” draws a parallel to ancient Israelite harvest practices, where farmers offer the first and finest portions of their crops to the Lord (Lev 2:12; 23:10; Deut 18:4).
 19. In Lutheran theology, the “already” is the present reality of salvation, where through faith alone (*sola fide*) a believer is fully justified and declared righteous before God solely by Christ’s atoning work. The “not yet” refers to the Christian’s ongoing sanctification and the

- awaited eschatological fulfillment—while the believer is simultaneously saint and sinner (*simul justus et peccator*), they continue to struggle against sin in this life and await the final resurrection and glorification. This dynamic tension between the present possession of salvation and its future consummation is sustained through the means of grace—Word and Sacraments—which continuously deliver Christ’s forgiveness and strengthen faith until His second coming establishes the fullness of God’s eternal kingdom.
20. This view stands in contrast to recent proposals that redefine faith primarily as “allegiance” or “embodied loyalty,” which—whatever their authors’ intentions—risk obscuring the Reformation insight that faith is fundamentally receptive rather than meritorious, and that justification rests on Christ’s work alone, not on the quality or comprehensiveness of human allegiance. See, for example, the following publications, where this perspective is lionized: Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017); Matthew W. Bates, *Beyond the Salvation Wars: Why Both Protestants and Catholics Must Reimagine How We Are Saved* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2025); Brandon D. Crowe, *Allegiance: Redefined Faith for the Real World* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2021); Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016).
 21. Luther echoes these observations in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 15, LW 28:109, “No, we must view [Christ] in this light, that this dying and rising again were for your benefit and mine. As He died and lay under the sod as you and I must die and be buried, thus He also rose again for our sakes and made an exchange with us; as He was brought into death through us, we shall be restored from death to life through Him. For by His death He has devoured our death, so that we all will also arise and live as He arose and lives.”
 22. Semi-Pelagianism maintains that humans can take the initial step toward faith through their own free will, independent of divine grace. This mindset is evident in slogans like “You do your best and God will do the rest” and “God helps those who help themselves.” From the Lutheran standpoint, semi-Pelagianism constitutes a denial of monergism and the doctrine of total depravity, for it erroneously ascribes to fallen humanity an inherent ability to begin or participate in their own salvation. Lutherans maintain unwaveringly that salvation is exclusively God’s work (*sola gratia*), and that even faith is a gift bestowed by the Holy Spirit (through the means of grace), not an act of human cooperation.
 23. The Greek adjective rendered “vain” (*kenos*; 1 Cor 15:58) denotes what is vacuous and devoid of any advantage or benefit. The similarly rendered adverb in verse 2 (“vain”; *eikē*) means “to no purpose,” “for no reason,” or “to no end.”
 24. In Lutheran theology, the Law and the Gospel are two distinct ways in which God deals with humanity. The Law reveals human sin and sets forth God’s righteous demands, while the Gospel announces God’s grace and forgiveness in Christ. These two must be carefully distinguished (*distinctio*) so that each fulfills its proper role without distortion. Yet, they must not be separated (*separatio*), for both come from the same God and work together in the life of faith. Holding this balance requires discernment: the Law is applied to expose and convict of sin, while the Gospel is applied to console with pardon and new life. Together, they remain inseparable, complementary dimensions of God’s revelation.
 25. In this regard, Luther explains in his *Lectures on Galatians*, LW 26:309, that the “true function and the chief and proper use of the Law is to reveal to man his sin, blindness, misery, wickedness, ignorance, hate and contempt of God, death, hell, judgment, and the well-deserved wrath of God.”

26. In *Career of the Reformer IV* (LW 34:337–338), Luther describes a decisive theological breakthrough. Formerly, he recoiled at the phrase, “a righteousness from God” (Rom 1:17), interpreting it as the Creator’s strict justice by which he punishes sinners. Yet, through study and struggle, Luther came to cherish the phrase. He discovered that this righteousness is not God’s active, condemning justice, but his gracious gift—the righteousness by which God, for Christ’s sake, declares the sinner to be not guilty or pardoned through faith. This insight brought Luther peace, for it revealed the Gospel as sheer mercy rather than demand. Later, Luther found confirmation in Augustine, who likewise understood the “righteousness from God,” not as the attribute by which the Lord is righteous, but as the gift of forgiveness bestowed upon believers in justification.
27. On this point, see Luther’s comment in his *Lectures on Galatians*, LW 26:232, “On His [Christ’s] account God overlooks all sins and wants them to be covered as though they were not sins. He says, ‘Because you believe in My Son, even though you have sins, they shall be forgiven, until you are completely absolved from them by death.’”
28. With respect to this truth, see Luther’s comment in his *Epistle for Christmas Day*, LW 75:200, “Thus our eyes are closed to the worldly and visible things, and we hope instead for the eternal and invisible things. Grace does all of this through the cross, which brings us the godly life which is intolerable to the world.”

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